

ALL Western

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THE FEUDISTS

Complete Novel

By Ernest Haycox

★

SHERIFF TROUBLE

By Eugene Cunningham

★

ENCHANTED RANCH

By Arthur Preston Hankins



"I'll bust y' in two!" roared
Ables.

Sheriff Trouble, Chap. 4





ALL WESTERN

April-June, 1950

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A MYSTERIOUS RIDER and a beautiful girl in search of happiness fight their way through the violence and treachery and greed of a savage rangeland feud.



The Feudists

By Ernest Haycox

CHAPTER ONE

Smiling Fugitive

JIM RENO, riding along the bottom of an arroyo, heard the shot smash out of the distance ahead and to the right with that thin, flat sound made only by a rifle. For a moment he thought he was the target—the natural enough reaction of a man with a price on his head—and his instant response was to crowd his pony over against the more abrupt side of the arroyo and scan it both ways. But

nothing appeared and no bullet's dust-dimple showed its telltale shape; and lifting his eyes to the bald bench he had been paralleling all this afternoon, he found neither marksman nor ravel of gun smoke. Thus alertly poised, he heard the gun speaking through the sultry silence again.

That stirred him to action. Leaving the saddle, he crawled to the rim of the arroyo and there saw the whole story in one long survey. A rider fled up the undulating pitches of the bench with every evidence of mad haste,

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leaving a banner of dust behind him—the length of that banner showing exactly which shallow depression he had started from. Out in the open prairie, about a thousand yards behind him, a horse stood with dropped reins. Slightly aside from the horse, a man's body turned over and over on the ground.

"Hit bad," mused Reno. Then because his experience with grief in its multifold forms had taught him never to forget his own safety, he added, "And if he dies, here I am right on the premises to be accused of doing it." Looking back to the bench, he watched the ambusher at last wheel about a dun-colored knob and vanish.

Then he turned about, and his eyes, sharp blue against the clean smoothness of a bronze skin, quested the back trail. As far as he could see, which was about three miles, there was only emptiness—good enough indication that his recent maneuvering in the pocketed country had thrown the posse temporarily off scent. He had, he supposed, a three-hour lead, and with that decided, he slid back to his pony and rode out of the arroyo. Aiming for the fallen one, he shook his head with a mild feeling of contempt for his own weakness.

"Probably get shot for my pains," he observed. "Posse behind, fellow with a rifle up on the bench, and this poor devil dyin' out there—him no doubt thinkin' I'm the one that got him."

He did, then, a characteristic thing. He grinned, and the grin lightened the assured and rather hard cast of his features. The pressed severity of his mouth was released, small weather wrinkles deepened about the eyes, and at once a touch of ironic, uncaring recklessness lay revealed.

Three hundred feet from the prone figure, he checked in, straightening his tall, flat torso. The fellow had showed some sign of life. One hand reached outward. A dark and pointed face became distinct.

"Easy," called Reno. "I didn't dry-gulch you."

A surprisingly strong voice came out of the man. "I know that. Come on up."

Reno crossed the interval and slipped to the ground, immediately feeling a profound pity. Here was a young, magnificently set-up body, long and lean and powerful. But it was shattered now beyond repair. There wasn't any hope—the man was going out. Telltale sweat streaked the dark skin and a grayish pallor mottled it. Now and then one long leg lifted from a reflex of pain. All that remained strongly alive were the eyes. The light that came out of them was vital, almost fiercely intense.

"Take care of yourself," said the man. "Look and see if—if he's still in sight."

"No. He pulled out after the second shot. Now, old trapper, we've got to do something in a hurry. I'll lift you—"

But the man shook his head, a slow and grim gesture of defeat. "Leave me alone. I'd fall to pieces."

"You're sure of that?" asked Reno, profoundly stirred.

He had seen men die before—often enough, in fact, to have developed that deep and quiet sense of fatalism that colored all his thoughts and sometimes made him seem callous to suffering. But here was a man dying as a man ought to die—without fear and without crying. The bright black glance was actually defiant. It was sad to see such fine courage wasted.

"You're a stranger," grunted the man.

"Yes. Anything I can do?"

"If you're no fool, you'll never stop till this cursed country is behind you," said the man with a heavy bitterness.

"You know who got you?" asked Reno.

"I know," said the other. But he pressed his lips together, and Reno understood that the name of the killer would never come out. On impulse Reno rose and got his canteen and tipped it to the man's lips. Afterwards he took off his hat and shaded the upstaring face.

"Bound anywhere in particular?" asked the fellow.

"If you want a message delivered," said Reno, "I'll carry it."

The fellow's eyes closed. He said rapidly, "Go to Morgantown and find Big Lafe McMurtree. Tell him. Tell him Two-bits is dead. Tell him—it was a rifle shot."

"That all?" asked Reno.

"Take my gun with you. Give it to him."

"Nothing else?" pressed Reno. "No information as to who did it?"

"If you tell him exactly what I told you," the man said faintly, "he'll know."

Reno's deep sympathy moved him to say something then that he never would have said to another person.

"When you cross the Jordan ferry, my friend, the valley beyond will be green with grass and freshly watered. It'll be a pleasant place to camp. Is there no woman you'll want to send a word to?"

"Me?" muttered the other. "A McMurtree? What woman cares for that black tribe? There's only one in all the hills to grieve. She shouldn't, for we've

hurt her ever since she was a kid. But she'll think kindly of me long after the rest have forgotten."

"Open your mouth," said Reno, tipping the canteen.

But there was no obeying gesture and Reno, looking down with a close curiosity, saw the other's lids slowly relax and creep partially open. He knew then, even before he laid his hand across that broad chest, what the answer was—the fellow had drifted on.

Rising slowly, Reno replaced the canteen and reached for his cigarette tobacco. Along his lean jaws appeared a sudden tightness and the rest of his features took sharper and harder form—the unconscious reaction of a man who hated injustice. For at twenty-five, with the rather bitter and rough-and-tumble experiences of his life to draw from, he still possessed the instinctive fighter's sense of fairness.

"Another good hand ridin' into the sunset too soon," he muttered.

Lifting his eyes then, he saw that the day was drawing to a close, and it reminded him of the fact that he was losing good minutes. He could do nothing more here. His position was dangerous. His promise to the dead man laid him wide open to further uncertainty. Nor could he undertake to move the fellow to the nearest town. That chore, he realized, would be done by the posse now undoubtedly-closing up. What he had to do in short order was to put the miles behind and to watch with an increasing vigilance.

Reaching down, he got the other man's gun—a forty-five with a worn grip that had a star-and-crescent inlay of mother-of-pearl—and stowed it in a saddlebag. Then he swung up and lined out to the westward at a strong canter. Another rear glance.

But, he reflected soberly, this whole business is bad for me. I'm a stranger and I'm mixed up in something that probably has a lot of strings tied to it. This range is different from no other. Whoever wanted that fellow dead will move a lot of dirt to put the job on me. I can expect to be challenged any time.

When the sun fell beneath the earth, he was a good eight miles off in the depths of a land that ran west and south without visible break—a free and open range, pleasant to the rider's eye. To the north the tawny bench still paralleled him, increasing in ruggedness and backed up by a considerable range of hills that swung forward from the distance. Just as dusk fell he looked behind again and thought he made out the posse far off. Then darkness came with a rush and he laid the sandy miles beneath him one by one.

By degrees the bench began to curve away and he followed along that bend with the general belief that the town he sought, which was Blackrock, stood somewhere ahead with one face showing to the prairie and the other confronting the hills. Around the bend he saw it in the shape of twinkling lights all aglimmer across the flats, and about eight o'clock he entered the narrow central street of this range settlement.

A double row of locust trees ran the length of the street, deepening the shadows and accenting the warmth of those lamplight lanes gushing out of the buildings. A saloon blazed brilliantly near by, men walked indolently beneath the porch roofs, there was the sound of guitar and fiddle somewhere. Coming upon a water trough, Jim Reno let his pony drink sparingly, then rode into the adjacent stable's runway. When he dismounted a hos-

tlar advanced from the darkness.

"Grain him," said Reno, "but keep the saddle on him."

The hostler's face came closer, thin and inquisitive. "Keep the saddle on?" he said.

"Yes," replied Reno shortly, and turned away.

He knew that so simple an order exposed his hand, and he knew too that the news would spread. All these towns were alike, alert and suspicious, weighing strangers in the light of factional politics. Such deliberate plans as he had laid were worthless now, made so by the death of that rider on the prairie, and he could only guide himself from one uncertain situation to another. Understanding this, he strolled into a restaurant and ordered a meal.

Only thing I'm sure of, he reflected over his eggs and bacon, is that nobody will recognize me.

Afterward he went back to the street, fashioning a cigarette in the shadows. Half a dozen townsmen sat on the porch steps to his immediate right and talked in drawling syllables. The casual strollers drifted in and out of the saloon across the way. But as he paused in his tracks, debating with himself, he noticed one man walk from that saloon with an air of purpose and come across. He passed Reno at arm's distance, not seeing him, and went straight to the stable, there turning in. It meant nothing, it meant anything. Reno held his place, on guard. A little later the man emerged from the stable and strode back to the saloon.

"Thought so," said Reno to himself and dragged a deep draught of smoke into his lungs. He had wondered about making his appearance in the saloon, but he realized now that it was a nec-

essary step. Somebody was showing a curiosity which he himself had to satisfy.

I've got, he reflected, about one hour. Posse will be here then.

He went over and shouldered through the swinging doors. At the bar across the rear he ordered his whisky and, dawdling against the mahogany, studied the place through the mirror behind it.

It was comfortably filled, this room. Smoke hung thickly from the ceiling like ropes of moss, and riders tramped around with the leisurely restlessness that rises from a full stomach and a free night. A half-dozen poker tables were in full play. Two floormen moved swiftly through the crowd and somebody called rather sharply: "Three sevens will take this pot." Reno drank and laid his glass down.

"Stranger?" asked the barkeep, looking closely at Reno.

"Never saw me before?" countered Reno.

"No-o."

"Must be a stranger then," said Reno, eyes going back to the mirror.

He saw something interesting reflected from a far corner of the room. Over there three men stood against a wall and looked at him with more than a casual attention. One of these—tall and broad and beyond the middle of life—bent his head and spoke briefly to the fellow at his left hand. That was all. The trio split and the addressed party strolled from the place. Reno paid his bill thoughtfully and turned out. Past the doors he sidestepped to get away from the light and went on down the walk.

He drew up with a swift, defensive motion. A slim figure drifted away from a dark wall, wheeled across his

path, and spoke with a softness and a casualness infinitely deceptive.

"No offense, but there's somebody as wants to talk to you."

"I don't know anybody here," parried Reno.

"Would that make any difference?" asked the other.

"If he wanted to talk to me bad enough, I guess not," admitted Reno.

"That's it," said the other gently.

But Reno was exploring his chances and so he went on. "I'm not on anybody's pay roll. Why should I take orders?"

"This man," answered the other, "is accustomed to havin' his way." And then a touch of cold insistence came into the words. "Anyhow, your horse probably won't be ready for you short of another ten, fifteen minutes."

"I wondered about that," remarked Reno. "All right. Lead the way."

CHAPTER TWO

The Messenger



THE man turned and went into an alley beside the saloon. Trailing through this utter gloom, Reno swung around a corner and stumbled through the clutter of boxes and broken things. The man halted, tapped lightly on a door and opened it. "Go ahead," he said, and Reno stepped into a room that was, he immediately recognized, directly behind the bar. All the sound of the crowd came through in muted proportions. The messenger closed the door.

There were three men—the messenger, the tall and heavy fellow Reno had noticed before, and another whose

square, bold, inordinately hard face gave an impression of brusque cruelty. Reno knew the types of men who rode the prairie, and his weighting glance told him all he wished to know about this particular one. Straight or crooked, the fellow was a driver and a killer. He weighed around two hundred pounds and his hips and legs were powerful after the fashion of a bronc buster. His torso went thin at the flanks and broadened again at the shoulders. He had long arms, the hands of which were oddly tapered and supple—good hands for a gun, Reno instantly thought. But it was the face that dominated Reno's attention—that harsh, dark face with the pressed mouth, the flattened cheekbones, and the drilling, blinkless eyes as black as the jet-black hair showing beneath the man's hat.

All this he gathered at a glance. But he had been long enough at it to draw a dry comment from the older man in the room, who said shortly, "You're lookin' at my foreman, Hale Wolfert."

Reno swung his glance over to the speaker. He was a big man with a small, nut-shaped head which bore sly and sharp Yankee features. His hair was white and he was perhaps better than fifty. Reno asked a sudden question. "Then who are you?"

"Pete Vilas," said the man. After a moment he added, "I own some of the prairie."

"What of it?" challenged Reno.

Vilas chuckled and looked at his foreman. "Comes to the point, don't he, Hale?"

But Wolfert neither answered nor moved. His eyes clung steadily to Reno, and a scowling disfavor appeared to collect in them.

Vilas spoke abruptly to the third

man, the one who had brought Reno to this room. "That's all, George." George slipped quietly through the door. Vilas went on: "You were probably on your way straight through Blackrock, weren't you?"

"What makes you think so?" asked Reno.

"Left your horse saddled in the stable."

"I wondered who was interested enough to go look," observed Reno.

Vilas expelled that humorless fragment of a chuckle again. "You're a sharp hoy. Any name?"

"Reno—Jim Reno."

"It will do as good as any," said Vilas shrewdly. "Now, Reno, I need a favor done. I was thinking you'd do it."

"Why?"

"Because," said Vilas pointedly, "I can do you one."

"Maybe; maybe not," was Reno's noncommittal answer.

"Oh, yes. I can keep you from falling into the hands of the sheriff. Is that a good guess or ain't it?"

"What's the favor you need?" parried Reno.

"I want a message delivered. Nothing more."

Hale Wolfert suddenly came out of his long silence. "I don't think you better use him, Pete."

"Why not?" demanded Vilas.

"I just don't believe you better."

"Know anything about him?"

"No," said Wolfert.

"Then what's your objection?"

Hale Wolfert said emotionlessly, "I don't like the looks of him."

Quiet came to the room, and Reno stood there with the full force of both men's eyes beating on him. Vilas's little head came forward, and his sly face became deeply thoughtful. But he

said finally, "I can judge a man as well as you, Hale. He'll do. It's no odds anyway."

Wolfert shrugged his shoulders and Vilas turned to Reno again. "How about it?"

"I see the point," drawled Reno. "All right. What message and where to?"

"Do you know anything about this country?" asked Vilas.

Reno was still a moment, then said, "No," with a certain touch of reserve. It brought from Wolfert a more relentless, saturnine attention and Vilas seemed to check his heady talk. But after a while he nodded and spoke again.

"Well, it's no country for invalids, Reno. I wouldn't send you out and not tell you that. Up in those black hills is a crowd of men that hate the sight of the prairie and everything that walks on the prairie. There's a little joint up there called Morgantown. Seventeen miles away. In the last ten years I don't recall a Morgantown man ever coming to Blackrock. As for the other way around, a Blackrock man couldn't get to Morgantown if he wanted. That's where I want you to take the message."

A long silence fell across the room. Reno studied the other.

"So," he said at last, "I'm the sucker."

"I was waiting for that," admitted Vilas with a show of candidness. "But I'm not playin' you for a sucker. It's an out-and-out proposition. You're not takin' anybody's place and you're not inheritin' anything. I can't get a Blackrock man up there without havin' him shot off the road. You're a stranger. You'll make it."

"Who's this message to?"

"I want you to go find Big Lafe McMurtree," said Vilas slowly.

Jim Reno looked down at the table and ran his hand idly across it. "How'll I find him?"

There was no immediate answer and when he raised his head he saw Vilas staring at Wolfert with an air of suppressed, ironic amusement.

"Well," said Vilas, "you'll have no trouble about that. He'll find you. Consider that settled."

"What's the message?"

For reply Vilas turned to the desk and pulled up a chair. He got out a pencil and a piece of paper and for some moments his raw-boned fist labored across the paper. When he had finished he handed the result over to Reno.

"Nothing secret about it. Look at it for yourself."

Reno read:

McMurtree:

The cattlemen of Crossjack Range consider that the long war between hill and prairie has gone far enough. We will countenance no more raids on our beef. Speaking for myself, if this goes on any longer I will bring a full party to Morgantown and burn it. Suggest you arrange a meeting with me to settle this Sunday. I am willing to ride anywhere along the base of Drum Peak to talk it out with you.

P. Vilas

"I'll make no friends up there, bringing this," observed Reno.

"There's always some small danger in everything," admitted Vilas. "I didn't say this was shy of trouble."

"Supposin' I say no?"

Vilas leaned back and met Reno's glance squarely. "You don't want to meet the sheriff, do you?"

"Thought that was the proper an-

swer," said Reno, "but I wanted to get it straight. All right. Am I supposed to bring back an answer?"

"Answer?" asked Vilas, as if he had never thought of it. "Well, now. Well, if there's such a thing as an answer, bring it back."

"All right," decided Reno, and put the note in his pocket.

"The Morgantown-Blackrock road runs due north of the stable," said Vilas. "Get on your way. I'll see the sheriff, but I don't want him to find you in town."

Reno turned to the back doorway and had his hand on the knob when Hale Wolfert said curtly, "Wait a minute, you." And when he wheeled about he found the foreman looking at Vilas with a stubborn displeasure.

"Pete," said Wolfert, "think this over before you let him go. I don't like his looks. If he gums up the works, where will we be?"

Vilas rose from the table. "What works will he gum up, Hale?" he asked smoothly. "The proposition is plain and aboveboard, ain't it?"

Wolfert muttered a sound of disgust, pivoted on his heels, and passed through the inner door to the barroom. Reno let himself out the back way without further delay, walked up the nearest alley, and then, pressing along the walk to an area where locust and porch created a profound pool of blackness, started to cross over to the stable.

He never took a step into the roadway. Poised on the edge of the boards, he heard the cantering hoofs of a considerable party coming out of the prairie. He stepped back, flattening against the building wall. From that position he saw a dozen riders come down the street double file. As the first building lights touched them, he rec-

ognized the sheriff's party.

With all the assurance given him by Pete Vilas, he felt no ease. His attention began to turn toward one point of escape and another. Meanwhile the sheriff's party passed and nosed in at the hitch rack. Looking that way, he saw Hale Wolfert come through the glare of the saloon doors, step aside from the oncoming posse members, and go rapidly across the street. Something about that maneuver further warned Reno to sudden action, and accordingly he walked straight over to the stable and into it. The hostler stood in the runway, barring his path.

"I'm going out," said Reno abruptly, reaching for his money. "Where's the pony?"

The hostler's answer was reluctant, defensive. "I've had orders."

"Sure. Well, that's over with. Where's the horse?"

"I ain't had any contrary order," insisted the hostler.

Reno's reply was to reach out, seize the man by the shoulders, and spin him around.

"This is not your fight, brother, and it will do you no good to get your head busted in it. Where's that horse?"

"Left-hand end stall," grumbled the man.

Reno went past him on the run, reached the stall, and turned into it. He was in the saddle and swinging through the rear doorway when the hostler cried out angrily:

"I hope you get your liver blasted out, you—!"

It was the talk of an angered man, yet Reno, cool and taut, heard in it the suggestion of something about to happen—something the hostler knew. It prompted him to bend far over against the saddle as he went out the

rear way, across the baked corral area and through a wide gate.

Somebody rose up on his right. He saw the shape rearing against the night's lesser black and as he saw it he slashed the pony with his spurs and reached his hand toward his holster. The blackness was etched with a sharp streak of light, and a deep roar swelled the night. Marking that point, Reno let go with his shots, throwing them down recklessly as he sped away into the open. There was one more reply and then a silence.

Over behind the row of buildings, in the street, men began shouting, but the sound soon faded as Reno cleared Blackrock, struck the ruts of a northward road, and faded down it. He was, he knew, in the clear. There would be no pursuit. The ambusher was alone and could not afford to follow. A mile onward he lessened the gait and relaxed.

"Didn't hit him," he said to himself, "but he fell to keep from bein' hit. Wolfert, no doubt about it. He knows something about me Vilas didn't. Yet it don't seem possible he could have recognized me."

Overhead the velvet of the sky was set with diamond points of starlight. In front of him the bench and the range behind it made a seeming barrier. The ground began rising beneath him and a sharper air poured across the slopes. Sitting easy, he aimed for Morgantown, seventeen miles away.

Nothing Vilas said about this message fooled me, he pondered. The words of it mean something else. The whole thing is aimed for another purpose. But it will serve my purpose better than if I planned it deliberately. I'm back. That's the main thing—I'm back to do what is left to be done.

CHAPTER THREE

The Deep Hills



HERE was something deceptive about the rugged country into which he traveled. It seemed to bury him in its depths, yet more than two miles out of Blackrock the first quick tilt of the bench lifted him to a crest from which he saw again the lights of the town. After that the road tackled earnestly an increasing grade, and for long intervals Reno's pony went on at a slogging walk. A bank of fog drifted thickly about him. Beyond that level he was in the pure darkness of tree country, and all around him lay a profound stillness and mystery. He realized he had put the bench definitely behind him. This now was the scarp of that distant range he had seen during the day.

He went on for better than two hours through the windings of this gorge, until its walls began to spread farther apart. Shortly afterward he passed what was apparently another trail running due south along a minor crest of the hills. Not knowing which was the proper way to Morgantown, he paused briefly to study it out and then pressed on with the assumption that the straight course was the likeliest. But he had not gone far when he was warned that the trail had other riders.

The warning came abrupt and clear from the hind quarter, in the shape of ponies' feet striking fast and hard on the trail. He had only time enough to crowd his own mount against a side wall of the gorge when they came beating up and by. Crouched there in

the saddle, an arm reached across the animal's nostrils, he made out one rearing shadow after another passing forward into the gloom. Quick dust rolled out and touched him, and then the noise of their travel died in the distance ahead.

"Twelve or fifteen of them," he said, half aloud, "and they came out of that side trail. Busier than irritated bees." Turning the meaning of it over and over in his cool mind, he added, "Only a few kinds of business rate that sweat and grunting by dark. This is the sort of country I thought it might be."

At twenty-five, Reno was well aware of the fact that any land of night riders would be a land of subterfuge. This was what he had pushed into—subterfuge and uncertainty to the point of considerable danger. As for himself, he could play it cautious or he could play it reckless, but the one necessary thing was to tie himself, by one means or another, into the life of these hills. He could accomplish no part of his own plan as long as he remained an outlander.

So, he mused, I better play it slightly reckless. Seems the surest way. Slightly reckless—and continue the sucker role till it peters out. Nobody will recognize me.

The gorge spread all at once into a small valley and as Reno went down the curving grade he was again bathed by a fog thick enough to be stirred by his passage. This, added to the dark, made a blinding element and he could only let the horse choose its route. Long afterward—he judged it to be another two miles—he felt the road rise. From the distance a rumbling sound began to lift and reverberate through the night. Presently he got above the fog and caught the faintly

etched outline of trees against the black sky. But the road sheered away and went directly toward the rush and mutter of a waterfall. He thought he saw the twinkle of a light ahead, but it vanished swiftly. Then the hoofs of his horse suddenly woke loud drumming echoes as the animal crossed a plank bridge.

"Hold up!"

He checked the horse to a slow drifting and said casually, "All right."

"Who is it?" said the voice.

"The name is Reno—Jim Reno."

"Where from?"

"Blackrock."

A little silence ensued, broken finally by a throaty oath.

"Either you're lyin' or you've got the nerve of a brass monkey! And where do you figure you're goin' at this hour of the night?"

"Morgantown," said Reno calmly.

He heard then the stir of other men coming afoot from the background. The challenging voice was still, but a murmur of talk rose to the rear. A gun hammer clicked. The voice resumed, cynically:

"And I reckon you're just out to get a breath of air—nothin' more!"

"No," said Reno crisply. "I've got business up here. Use your head. What in hell else do you suppose would be bringin' me into the hills after night-fall?"

"Light that lantern," called the voice, "and let's get a look at this free-spoken customer."

Those other men seemed to be waiting for the order. A match blazed instantly and a lantern's chimney dropped over a clear yellow flame that cut sharp arcs in the dark. It came bobbing on and lifted in front of Reno. Looking down at the men behind that

lantern, Reno saw a face that reminded him oddly of somebody else—a long and slanting and heavy-featured face. The voice of the spokesman, who still remained beyond Reno's view, rose resonantly.

"I don't know you. What's your business up here?"

"I've got a couple of messages for Big Lafe McMurtree. You boys know him?"

"Don't you know him?" parried the other.

"No," said Reno.

"Then," shot back the spokesman with an increase of temper, "you're no Blackrock hand. Better not lie!"

"I didn't say I was a Blackrock hand," returned Reno. "I said I came from there."

"What's the size of these messages?" demanded the spokesman.

"That happens to be none of your business," stated Reno with an even severity.

"Might be some questions as to that," grunted the spokesman.

But a milder voice came up from the rear. "We better take him in, Thedore."

"Let me handle this," said the spokesman in no pleasant manner.

"Then handle it and quit talkin'," retorted the mild one.

"All right," growled the spokesman, "we'll take him to Big Lafe's."

At a command, Reno moved forward with the lantern bearer trudging beside him. A horseman came suddenly abreast on the other side and showed one knife-scarred cheek in the light. It was, Reno realized, the fellow who had done all the talking. Roan-colored hair showed along the man's temple and his eyes had a Mongol narrowness to them. Nothing more was said. The

lantern bearer abruptly extinguished his light and went off. Presently the rest of the unseen group came milling into the road, now asaddle, and, thus escorted, Reno trotted past a dense point of timber and on toward a beam of light glimmering from a house window.

The cavalcade ignored it and turned into a lesser and more abysmally slightless route. It shot upward precipitously, high into a windier world. Somewhere the group turned again and went single file along the barren spine of a ridge. Twenty minutes later the course fell down the side of a canyon where a small creek went rioting between jagged walls. Reno, trying to establish the windings of this trail in his mind, finally gave up with the feeling that the leader of the party was deliberately complicating the thing. The feeling became certainty when they shifted up another stiff slope and came to a momentary halt.

One rider trotted on for a way, spoke a subdued phrase and called back, "All right." The party moved ahead and within a quarter mile came upon a clearing. At the far end sat a house all aglow.

A pack of hounds charged forward in full throat, swirling about the feet of the horses. At the porch a pair of men stepped from the shadows and stood silently alert. The spokesman murmured something indistinct to them and pointed at Reno, who got out of the saddle and walked forward. At the same time a door swung open. Urged by the spokesman's shove, Reno passed into what was the largest room he had ever seen.

It was fully three-quarters of the lower floor of this sprawling structure. Above it, reached by a winding stair-

case, an overhanging gallery ran around the four sides; and off this gallery opened a series of doors. Reno, sizing it up, thought the place more like a barracks than a ranch house. But this was only a quickly passing reflection, for his attention crossed the room to the huge fireplace beneath the far gallery and fastened itself to the man standing there.

The'dore, the spokesman, said bluntly, "There's Big Lafe," and Reno walked on until the grateful heat of the fire touched him and Big Lafe was but a yard away.

Big Lafe once had been mighty in all his proportions. Even now obviously in the seventies, there was about him a dominating strength and a proud sense of power. His hands were clasped behind him, thus throwing forward a fine, high pair of shoulders. His thews were pronounced, his bones well covered, his chest soundly arched. Well over six feet, he had the tall man's habit of bowing his head to lesser men. He did it now and Reno, who never failed to measure the worth of men about him, saw the light of those ice-blue eyes beneath the shaggy, bushy brows turn intent and sharp. It was a driving sort of inspection, full of insistent challenge and harshness. Yet it was not brutal, nor was that long, calm face openly antagonistic. Rather, the cast of those strong, commanding features was one of discipline and confidence. It was clear to Reno that Big Lafe McMurtree ruled without doubt and had no fear.

The silence held for a long while and the dozen or so men in the room—all grouped to the rear of Reno—respected it. Big Lafe McMurtree slowly unclasped his hands and swung about to kick a log deeper into the fire. The resultant

rise of light flooded across the room. Big Lafe turned back and spoke over Reno's head with a cool abruptness.

"Where'd you find him, The'dore?"

"He came up the Blackrock road like he owned it," said The'dore quickly. "We heard him when he crossed the plank bridge at Garry Creek."

"Seem surprised when you stopped him?"

"No-o," said The'dore with reluctance. "You'd of thought he was doin' us a favor. Said he had a message for you—and wouldn't tell me what it was."

"Wouldn't tell you?" repeated Big Lafe as if that meant something. His cutting glance whipped over to Reno. "What is your name?"

"Reno."

Big Lafe considered it thoughtfully, deeply, then said, "There are no Renos in Blackrock. Where did you come from?"

"I came *through* Blackrock," said Reno. "That's enough for you to know."

"So it's like that?" asked Big Lafe. "Well, what is the message?"

Reno reached into his pocket for the note Vilas had given him and handed it over. McMurtree read what had been written with a sort of aloof calm, folded the paper, and tossed it on the fire. Closely watching for a reaction, Reno found no disturbance on the disciplined cheeks of this old fellow. Big Lafe's glance came back shrewdly to him.

"You know what was in it?"

"Yes."

"There'll be no answer," said Big Lafe casually.

"I judged he expected none."

Big Lafe's eyes narrowed. "How much of Vilas's business do you know?"

"None. Never met the man till to-

night. But that doesn't stop me from guessing."

"And he picked you, a stranger, to deliver this?"

"He said no Blackrock man could get this far."

"Then what caused you to tackle a job that might of ended bad for you?"

Reno grinned. "There was some pressure in the matter. Vilas agreed to keep the posse off my trail."

Big Lafe shook his head. He said, unexpectedly, "You're no crook, my boy."

"Thanks," said Reno, and turned sober. "There's something else I'll have to tell you. This afternoon, ten miles due east of Blackrock, I heard a couple shots over the hump. When I got up there I saw a fellow dying on the ground and another fellow riding hell-bent into the bench. I could do nothing but give the hit party a little water. Before he died he asked me to find you and to tell you that he was gone. That Two-blts was gone. And that a rifle got him."

He had expected no great show of emotion, for the short interval in this room had told him clearly that this group of men were bound by a quiet and a rigid control. Even so, it mildly astonished him that the ensuing moments seemed as blank of sound as the heart of the grave. Not one body behind him shifted, not one breath lifted. As for Big Lafe, the long lips compressed a little and there was passage of feeling deep behind the eyes. Then the man straightened his fine shoulders and said:

"How am I to believe this, sir?"

"In my left-hand saddlebag is a gun with a star-and-crescent inlay he asked me to bring here."

Big Lafe made a slight motion with

an arm, at which one of the crowd walked from the room. "Vilas—he knows about this?" demanded the old man.

"I never mentioned it to him."

The hand came back from outside. "No gun in either saddlebag," he called accusingly.

Reno whirled around and demanded, "Who's been monkeyin' with my gear? That gun was there."

Big Lafe's voice took on a definite tone of authority. His words cracked across the room. "The'dore, where is the gun?"

The'dore's chin raised. In the light, his face seemed more unprepossessing, more slanting than by the brief rays of the lantern. The knife-scar made a long evil track across one cheek and those Mongol eyes were narrower than ever. He said, a little sullenly:

"Nobody has touched that horse since I caught this man. If you want my opinion, the man lies!"

"Reno," said Big Lafe slowly, "where else could that gun have gone?"

"I left the horse in Blackrock's stable for half an hour. I wonder—"

"No need to wonder" interrupted Big Lafe grimly. "It was lifted there."

"You believe that cock-and-bull story?" The'dore asked of Big Lafe.

"Be silent," snapped Big Lafe. He looked to Reno and some of the rigidity went out of his manner. "I thank you for telling me. It was my nephew you gave the drink of water to. You've done your chore. What next?"

"I'll be riding on," said Reno.

"Out of the country?"

Reno shook his head. "No. I'll be in the hills for a while."

"Not in these hills," interrupted The'dore. "Nobody rides these hills unless we say so."

"Unless who says so?" challenged Big Lafe.

"Unless you say so," amended The'dore, after a long, tight pause. Looking about, Reno saw The'dore's jaw work into lines of balky stubbornness. Big Lafe said abruptly:

"Reno, have you ever been in this part of the country before?"

"No."

"I think," said Big Lafe, "you are lying. But we shall soon find out. If you have, there is one pair of eyes in this house that will recognize you—no matter how long you might've been away. Rae!"

The silence settled again. Big Lafe swung half about, facing a door that led back from the lower floor to an inner room. Behind Reno was the utter quiet of men expecting something important to happen. And with this feeling in his bones—the feeling that all his fortunes depended on the next moment—he stiffened himself. That door opened softly and a woman stepped through, to pause there. Immediately afterward Reno's set muscles loosened with astonishment. In this house, among this rough crew, was actual beauty.

She was no more than twenty-five. A mass of black hair sat loosely above a broad white forehead. Below that were slim, slightly olive features and eyes that were dark and alive and full of vital fire. She was straight, with the graceful sureness of a splendid body showing through the loose riding-clothes she wore.

When she said, "What is it, Dad?" the throaty richness of the words fell on Reno's ears like pleasant music.

"Rae," said Big Lafe, "have you ever at any time seen this man before?"

Her glance turned on him and re-

mained steady and solemn. Reno stiffened again and a blankness settled across his cheeks. He saw her lips part slightly. She seemed to bend forward while she studied him, to collect every item of his individuality in that long, long survey. Without any doubt some quick reaction took place in her, for her hands half rose and fell. Then she turned her head swiftly toward Big Lafe.

"No," she said in a kind of breathless tone. "I never have."

"Never?" challenged The'dore.

"Never," said the girl.

"That's all," put in Big Lafe. "If you say you have never seen him, then he's a stranger. Your memory is longer than any I ever knew."

She started to turn back. Big Lafe cleared his throat and said slowly, "Two-bits is dead, Rae."

The girl started, whirled about. Reno saw her eyes widen in pure pain, and then fill. But a moment later she was gone, closing the door behind her. Big Lafe spoke once more.

"You'll stay here tonight, Reno. I'll show you a room. The'dore, see that his horse is put up."

"He belongs in the tool shed," muttered The'dore, "with a couple of men guardin' him. You're foolish to trust—"

But Big Lafe swept that aside with an ironic calm. "I'll run the McMurtree affairs a few years longer yet, The'dore. Reno, come with me."

Taking up a near-by lamp, he slowly climbed the stairs and turned along the gallery. At one open door he halted, passed the lamp to the following Reno, and bowed courteously.

"Trust you rest well," he said. "You are a smart man, Reno. You know more than appears on the record. And I do not doubt you have your own pur-

poses to serve. For tonight we'll let the matter rest."

"What purpose," asked Reno with a show of idle curiosity, "would be bringing me to this country?"

"Don't know," answered Big Lafe. "But they'll soon be disclosed. No man can go it alone up here. Remember that. You're nobody's fool. Vilas picked you to do a chore—and he knows men. So do I."

"You're thinking maybe I'll be in your way?" suggested Reno.

"Remains to be seen," said Big Lafe, and looked more closely at Reno. "There is," he added with a heavy slowness, "a slight possibility you might be a help to me."

"When you've got it figured out," said Reno, "let me know."

"Good night."

Reno nodded and went in, closing the door. He placed the lamp on the small table by the bed, sat on the edge of that bed, and slowly removed his boots. Big Lafe's solid footsteps retreated down the stairway and there was a rising hum of voices from below, broken by one angry accent that lifted and fell. In the adjoining room a board squeaked slightly, bringing Reno's narrowed eyes toward the flimsy partition.

With the boot in his hand, he got up, crossed to the only window, and from that point of view looked into the ranch yard. A man was at this moment leading his horse to the barn. Nearer at hand he saw a second fellow stolidly draped against a corral fence. The meaning of this one's location was clear enough. Pulling the shade down, Reno walked back to the bed.

"This much of it is accomplished," he said slowly to himself. "It's a beginning—nothing more. The rest of it's

going to be a lot harder."

His thoughts were broken by a soft drumming of finger tips against the wall. Once more riveting his attention there, he saw what he had not noticed before—the four thin seams of a doorway in that boarded surface, a doorway without latch or keyhole or knob. Saying nothing—for the softness of the signal sounded to him more like a warning than an announcement—he sat quite still. In the next moment the wall door swung open and Rae McMurtree stood before him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Memory Rides



ONE white hand rose in a gesture of caution and her eyes flashed quickly over toward the drawn shade.

"What are you doing here?"

"Delivering a message to your dad."

She waved that aside with an impatient gesture of her small hand. "What else?"

"To deliver another one you probably didn't hear."

"What was it?"

"If it is to be told," answered Reno, "your dad will probably do the telling."

She had been crying. He could see that tears were not far off now. And the last words of the unfortunate Two-bits occurred to him again. *There's only one woman to grieve for a black McMurtree.* This, Reno suddenly realized, was the woman, and she was grieving. It prompted a gentler speech on his part.

"That young lad—that Two-bits boy

was thinking of you when he died."

"Stop it!" said Rae. "Do you want me to bring all the house up here?"

"Thought it was something you might want to know."

"I don't want to think of it now. I don't want to cry till I get out of here. Listen—why are you in these hills?"

"I've answered."

"No, you have not. Neither message brought you here. It is something else."

"How do you figure it?" demanded Reno.

"You have fooled everybody else on the place." The dark, level eyes held his attention relentlessly. "If you passed through Blackrock you probably fooled all the people there. But I know you. I remember you. When I stepped into the living-room tonight I could have called your name."

"Why didn't you do it?" asked Reno.

She didn't reply, but her head moved negatively from side to side and the blackness of her eyes glowed with inner light.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"I'm on the dodge. The sheriff is down in the valley, so I'm up in the hills. Is that plain enough, Rae?"

"Don't call me that!"

"Why not?"

The girl's answer was cool, frank. "Because you will betray me into calling you by your first name, in front of the crew."

"All right," agreed Reno. "I'm not that man. He's dead. I came up here to deliver a message."

"Hold out your right hand," directed Rae McMurtree, and when Reno obeyed, her forefinger touched the heel of his palm and traced a slim white scar running across it. "You see," she half whispered. "I know. Jim, where are

you going?"

"Away from this ranch in the morning, if I'm allowed."

"You will not be allowed."

Reno's glance sharpened a little. "Is that what you came to tell me?"

"Partly," said the girl. "Partly that and to warn you not to give yourself away to any man on this place. Never let anybody know what your real identity is or your real purpose—whatever that may be. You are not with friends. There are McMurtrees in these hills who would betray you. I wanted to tell you that."

Then her manner changed again, turned harder. "But listen to me. I am a McMurtree. All of me. And there is nothing in all the world I despise so much as those men who are set against us. All the bitterness in my father's life, all his mistakes, all the violent things he has had to do are because of those men who hounded him, drove him here, made outlaws out of my kin.

"That," she added, "is a warning. I don't know yet what you are up to, or who you are working for. But should it be for those who are fighting us—I'll turn you over to the crew."

"Fair enough, Rae," said Reno, and was about to say something else when her quick signal of hand stopped him. In an instant she had turned and retreated to the other room, drawing the door behind her soundlessly.

Somebody came up the stairs two at a time and strode rapidly along the gallery. Reno's door burst open and The'dore stood there, his chest laboring with the quickness of his movement and his sullen eyes pinned to a Reno who stood calmly in his stocking feet and tapered off a cigarette. The'dore walked across the room, brushing Reno back toward the bed; and he rolled

the shade up from the window angrily.

"You leave that thing alone," he grunted. "And see that your light burns all night. Get it?"

"I understand English."

"Let me have your gun," was The'dore's peremptory order. He stretched his fist outward.

Reno, lighting his cigarette, studied the hand carelessly. "No, I guess not."

"By God, you will!" breathed The'dore.

"Who's running this show, you or Big Lafe?" demanded Reno. "He said nothing about this gun. So I keep it."

The'dore swung about, walked to the doorway, and looked carefully along the gallery. When he came back it was to face Reno across a shoulder's distance—so close at hand that Reno saw the slate-green flecks in the man's odd, hostile eyes.

"All right," muttered The'dore. "If you understand English, try to get this clear. If McMurtree lets you ride on tomorrow you see that you ride on—a damned long ways on. Don't light any campfires within thirty miles of this rancho. I don't want you around."

"You don't?" suggested Reno. "You personally don't?"

"That's right. I don't."

"And what worries you so much?"

The'dore's stubborn jaws shot outward. "Nothing right now, mister. And I mean to see nothing does in the future. That's why I'm telling you. Sleep on it. You're old enough to know what happens when a little sound advice is disregarded."

With that last thrust, The'dore backed out of the room and shut the door. Reno stood on his feet long enough to hear the man cross the lower hall and leave it. Going to the window then, he found the guard still posted by the cor-

ral and presently saw The'dore come around the house corner and leave some terse order with the man. The rest of the people of the ranch seemed to have settled for the night; no sound broke the pervading quiet inside this castle of the hills. Treading the narrow confines of his room, the last of the cigarette sputtering between his lips, Reno thought out his position with a studious intensity.

One thing, he reflected, appears plain. The old man runs affairs, but he's got opposition on the part of this The'dore. That may mean something. Depends on how the rest of the crew throw their vote.

Afterward he ground the stump of the cigarette between his fingers and rolled in for a welcome sleep.

Breakfast was a glum affair in a long mess hall back of the main room. Reno saw the strength of the McMurtree ranch for the first time and was mildly astonished at the number of hands present. There were, his quick count told him, more than twenty-five men on the place and that meant another half dozen out on remoté chores. The stiff and stern Big Lafe, who sat at the head of the table and drank a sparing cup of coffee, had thirty ready guns at his command. The'dore sat at the opposite end of the table, from which circumstance Reno judged that the sullen one was more or less of a foreman. The'dore's cast of features was increasingly dour and his eyes contained a sleepy surliness as if he had been up most of the night. The girl, at her father's immediate right, never glanced Reno's way during the meal.

After breakfast Reno strolled to the big hall. Then, nothing being said to him, he went out into the crisp early sunshine that flooded the long mead-

ow. It was a high meadow, with the hint of sharply descending slopes beyond the timber. The air was thin and rich and Reno's cigarette had a fine savor to it. Yet as he idled toward the string of outbuildings he felt a portent of trouble coming from behind. None of the McMurtree people were to be seen; all of them had remained in the house. Hoisting himself to the top rail of a corral, he presently saw them leave the house and from the scowling manner in which they broke across the yard, he knew they had been in a hot and heavy session. Big Lafe remained on the porch, his daughter with him. The'dore strode on to the barn and in a little while Reno saw a group of men surrounding the foreman, all talking. Reno's ready mind leaped at the inevitable conclusion.

Right there is the opposition. Big Lafe's hostile foreman has got ready followers.

His thoughts were broken by the old man's voice booming across the yard. "Get out a couple horses, The'dore! Don't stand there dreamin'!"

The'dore wrenched himself away from the group with an obstinate twist of his shoulders. The girl left the porch and came on toward Reno, slapping a romal carelessly against her breeches leg. A small felt hat sat insouciantly back on the dark head, and a beaded Indian jacket made a bright play of colors. But when she stopped in front of Reno he saw the sober cloud running across her eyes and the serious pursing of her lips.

"We're going for a little ride," she said.

Reno chuckled and slid down from the corral.

"Who," he wanted to know, "is the escort and who is the escorted?"

That broke her gravity. She smiled slightly back at him.

"The gentleman usually escorts the lady."

The horses came up, led by a morose-faced man who dropped the reins and stalked away. In complete silence they rode to the tree line and went single file down a twisted trail that huddled at the bottom of a canyon and climbed the far side. It was a mile or more before they came to the heights of a ridge and were able to ride abreast.

"There's some purpose to this sashay?" queried Reno.

Rae looked at him, again bending that intent scrutiny on his features. After a moment, she said, "Are you always digging for purposes, Jim?"

"I've traveled pretty much alone," answered Reno, with considerable thoughtfulness, "and have found little charity along the way. Somebody always wants something. It's been my policy to find out what. I've had to."

"And you've turned into a man that runs before a posse," she said rather bitterly. "What did you do? Was it very bad?"

"I'm not a full-fledged outlaw," drawled Reno. "Let it go like that."

They were riding south along the ridge and from time to time past sweeping vistas of the far-off Crossjack plain. A few miles farther, during which time not more than half a dozen words had been spoken, the girl swung with an apparent aimlessness to the westward and they came upon a lesser spur leading off toward that plain.

"My father," said the girl after a prolonged silence, "is a proud man. In some ways too proud. He looks backward—always backward. Somewhere in the Southern states there is a family plantation and a family record that

lists the McMurtrees clear into Queen Elizabeth's time. One McMurtree was a captain in Drake's fleet. One was a general in the Revolution. One was a senator. These are the things he remembers."

"And it's made him a little bitter?"

The girl's voice filled with energy. "Why shouldn't it? Until twenty years ago he was an honest man, a wealthy man, with a great ranch out there on that plain. He pioneered that country. Then the robbers came and the cattle war came and they fought him until he was bankrupt and they drove him up here with nothing to his name. They have been fighting him ever since. Well, what could he do but fight back? But the thing that hurts most is that he has had to fight as they fought—and that kind of fighting is without honesty. Do you see now?"

"Yes," said Reno, then thought of something else. "Who is this The'dore?"

She flashed him a swift, sharp glance. "You are quick to observe, aren't you? The'dore is our foreman. He came with us about two years ago. He is the only man"—her voice sank a little as she said it—"on the ranch who is not in some way related to me."

She drew up then, for they had come to a point of land that fell sheerly into an off-running glen. A half mile beyond was a sweep of open meadow and a group of buildings, gray and disjointed in the bright sunshine. The girl pointed with a gloved hand and spoke again, more to herself than to him.

"There's the sort of thing that happens in this country. Once upon a time, years ago, a family lived on that place. They were rich. They were respected. But when the cattle war came along

they were between fires, too close to the hills, too close to the plain. The man tried to be neutral, and consequently everybody hated him. So one night somebody ambushed Hi Benton and killed him. His wife and little boy had to move out. I used to play with that boy. I have often wondered what happened to him."

Reno looked down at the place without visible expression. The silence lengthened out until it became strained; and the girl at last said:

"If I have brought back unpleasant memories, Jim, I'm sorry. Only you cannot pretend to me. Not to me."

Reno looked at her. "All right, Rae. Here's Hi Benton's son back home. It's been a great many years. Everything's changed. I haven't got exactly the same body, the same face, nor the same mind. How did you recognize me?"

"Never mind," murmured the girl. "Perhaps it is because I always expected you to come back. Perhaps there were things I never forgot—about you. But the moment I stepped into the room and saw you, I knew. As it was, I almost betrayed you—almost called your right name."

"Wait a minute. We've got to get this straight. I was Jim Benton until three months ago. When I decided to come into this country I changed my name. I had to do that. I had to get a new name and a new frame of mind so that nobody would ever come up behind me, call out my old name, and take me off guard. I went to another country as Jim Reno. I practiced on that name until it was more mine than the old one. Then I lit out for here."

"And you changed your habits, too?" asked the girl, a little forlornly. "To the extent that you came here with a

posse on your heels? I'm sorry."

"Don't be too sorry," he warned her. "This is a dangerous game I'm playing."

"What game?" asked the girl.

"You ought to know what would bring me back. When Dad was killed, Mother and I had to leave. That hurt, Rae. It's been hurting ever since. What could a woman and a small kid do? We went to another valley, and I had to grow up and become the man of the family. All these years I've had the killing of my dad on my mind. Never forgot it, never let it die. Mother had a pretty tough time. But she always paid taxes on this old place, just to keep it up. We never knew who used it or lived in it. Still, we kept it. When I got old enough, she made me promise not to come here. She was afraid. I kept the promise—right up till she died, about six months ago. Then I made my plans." His voice chilled and he spoke more slowly. "I'm back now to find out who killed Dad. That's the whole story."

"Your mother was right," breathed the girl. "You shouldn't be here. You will never be able to uncover that mystery. And if you do, you will be killed."

He shook his head. "That's why I'm here. I don't think I'll ever leave this land again. Now remember, Rae. My name is Jim Reno. Even when you think of me, think of me as Reno, so that your tongue won't slip. I've put the old name behind me. Forgotten it. It's dead—and will be until I have learned all that I want to learn."

"All right," said Rae McMurtree quietly.

Reno turned toward the little valley below, pointing. "Who uses the ranch now?"

"It's free range," said the girl,

"though there's always cattle grazing on it and usually some party or another using it for occasional shelter."

"Rae, what's the gossip around here—about my dad's death?"

"Only whispers," replied the girl. "You've got to realize, Jim, that nobody cared much about you people. The McMurtrees didn't trust your father because he didn't have anything to do with them. The Vilas faction, as I get it, was always more or less afraid of him. That's all I know. But I've been sorry."

They started back along the same trail and wandered off into another glen. Once they saw the distant house-tops of a settlement which Reno guessed to be Morgantown. Afterward the thick forest enveloped them and it was past high noon when they cantered in to the McMurtree clearing. Reno got down.

"What was the purpose of this ride?" he demanded bluntly.

The girl studied him at length and seemed to make up her mind. "For one thing, to see if you'd try to break away. I'm glad you didn't."

Reno turned half about and nodded his head at the timber. The dore was just then emerging from the trees.

"I knew better than to try," said Reno. "He was within gunshot all the way, waiting for me to break."

The girl revealed a quick disappointment. "Was that all that kept you from running?"

"No. I wouldn't have tried in any event. I'm here to weather it through, Rae."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," said the girl. "As for the rest of my purpose, it was to find why you came here. I was told to get the reason from you, if I could."

"You asked no questions."

"I didn't have to, Jim. I was pretty sure I already knew."

"And now," said Reno grimly, "you can go back to your dad and report."

"When you want to be," observed the girl sadly, "you are very, very hard. I am not telling my father why you are here, or who you are."

"Why not?"

"Before that happens I want you to find out something for yourself."

"Which is what?"

"I want you to find out," said the girl, more energetically, "whether or not a McMurtree fired the shot that got your father." Then she bent nearer, for The'dore was slowly closing up, and whispered, "If you have any eyes at all, you can see that my father is in trouble and that this ranch is badly split. Perhaps—perhaps, Jim, you may be able to help. Nobody else can or will. I have little hope."

The'dore rode abreast and spoke heavily. "Had your parade, I see."

The girl turned without answering and walked to the house. Reno, feeling hungry, followed at a more indolent pace. At the door he paused to look around. The'dore's sultry Mongol eyes were unwinkingly set on him.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Rifle Speaks Again



THE afternoon turned hotter. Left completely to himself, Reno sat awhile on the main-house porch until his muscles cramped on him and a sense of restlessness drove him over to the yard as far as the barn. Crouched there in the semi-twilight of

that structure's long stable, he drew aimless patterns in the dust while his mind went ferreting among the possibilities. He felt quite clearly that the drowsing lull about him was rippling with cross-currents of trickery and deceit. There was something in the offing, some crisis of events. Thus, when at about four o'clock The'dore came from one of the bunkhouses and went to the main house at a rapid stride, Reno felt a half relief and a half excitement.

The'dore walked in with the swaggering sureness of one whose power was certain enough to depend on. Reno even heard the man calling Big Life's name throughout the great hall, calling it peremptorily. After that, quiet returned, but the McMurtree crew began to appear in the yard, two at a time. One of these ostentatiously walked to the barn and there halted. Half a dozen strolled indolently toward the main-house porch and took station there. The rest of the outfit straggled from point to point.

All this, however, was changed when The'dore again made his appearance on the porch. His voice lifted through the quiet afternoon like the echo of a brazen horn.

"Billy, you stay at the stable. Everybody else come in here."

In response, all the men went to the house with an ill-concealed alacrity, except that one nearest Reno. He came closer and leaned against the barn wall.

"It'll be all right, I suppose," drawled Reno ironically, "if I scratch my nose?"

The man only glowered and continued his open watchfulness. There were sounds of high and angry talk from the main house. Sharp echoes rolled across the yard. Time passed dragging-

ly and even the guard began to fiddle in his tracks. Looking at his watch, Reno was surprised to find it was after five. A short time later the meeting broke up and the crew appeared.

The'dore strode toward the corrals with part of the outfit compactly around him and Reno, studying all this with a deep watchfulness, thought that this group accompanying the foreman was larger than the one he had observed in the morning. The rest of the bunch followed to the corrals more slowly. Some of them separated and headed in the direction of the bunk-houses. When those men came to view again, they were armed.

Meanwhile heavy dust rolled out of the corrals. Fresh ponies were led into the yard, saddled and left standing by the main house porch. The'dore spoke a subdued word to a pair of men near him and these, immediately mounting, went away to the south just as the supper triangle began to beat up brassy eddies of sound. Without further invitation, Reno went in to eat. When he returned again to the porch the sun had fallen and dusk was shrouding the sky. Big Lafe came through the door and stood beside him.

"You'll ride with the men tonight," he said abruptly.

"Where to and what for?" asked Reno.

"The question will answer itself in due course," said Big Lafe. Then he added, "You are entitled to a reason, of course. The men feel that if you are a party to possible trouble this evening you'll be in the middle of it with them."

"Sound politics," applauded Reno dryly. "I take it I'm not free to leave this ranch, and I'm even less welcome to stay."

"Your coming here has brought a complication I never expected," said Big Lafe.

"McMurtree," replied Reno, unexpectedly frank, "take this for what it's worth. If you expect to deal the same brand of cards you been dealin' for a number of years, you better get another jack of spades. The card is worn out, full of thumb marks."

McMurtree turned and started to speak, but was prevented by the appearance of the outfit filing across the yard.

"All right, Reno," called The'dore. "Here's your rig."

"The'dore," said Big Lafe, "I'll be going with you. Get my pony."

The'dore sat back in the saddle and grunted his surprise.

"It will be the first time in a coon's age. What for?"

"When I get to the point of explaining my mind to you," said Big Lafe, "it will be a sorry world. Get my pony."

"There's no need of it," argued The'dore. "I'm able to take care of this. If you want it plain, I'd like you to stay here. We travel fast."

"Damn you—get my pony!" boomed Big Lafe. "When I speak I intend to be obeyed!"

The'dore let out a great gust of breath, but said nothing. A man on one flank of the party silently wheeled away to the barn. A wind ran gently across the porch and Reno, all at once full of admiration for this old, hard-bitten wolf of the hills, saw Big Lafe's grizzled hair ruff up on his head. The man stood there like a rock, implacable and without the knowledge of fear or physical weakness. He spoke again to his foreman with cutting calm.

"You are growing too big for your pants, The'dore. On my pay sheet

you're listed as a command hand. Don't forget that and don't make it necessary for me to have to remind you of it again."

"The day is about gone," said The'dore, with rage tightening his throat, "when you can speak to me like that! Here and now I warn you against tryin' it again!"

"You'll take it and you'll like it," snapped Big Lafe, his voice as cold as stone.

All the rest of the outfit seemed to quit breathing. Rae came out of the hall, coming between her father and Reno. The rider came back with the old man's horse and held the reins out. The'dore said, almost under his breath, "All right," and spurred away from the group. Big Lafe walked slowly to his saddle and climbed up. Reno, on the verge of following, heard the girl's bated whisper:

"Don't let The'dore ride beside you alone."

Reno left the porch and stepped to the leather. At that the group wheeled away, two and two, led by The'dore and Big Lafe, and cantered across the meadow.

Two miles of steady pacing in starlit darkness ended without warning in a complete halt. A sibilant murmur ran along the line and certain men detached themselves from it and trotted ahead. Cow smell came up with the wind. Then the cavalcade pointed into another of the countless depressions and within the space of minutes they were on the sides of a compact group of cattle.

The herd had been previously hunched and made ready. That much was plain to Reno. What also was plain to him was that Big Lafe's outfit had done this enough times before to have

perfected a discipline that needed no added commanding. The group shifted left and right until there was only a single man at Reno's side—and this one obviously instructed to remain so. A lantern suddenly flashed and went out after describing a complete circle. At that signal cattle and men moved forward, downgrade.

Somewhere ahead The'dore called out, "Billy!" and the man beside Reno answered, "It's all right." Another rider cut back and came up on Reno's other flank.

"I've got this taken care of," announced Billy with a trace of belligerence.

"What are you trying to do?" said Big Lafe's still voice. "Notify the country we're abroad tonight? Get the hell up forward and tell The'dore to shut up."

"All right," grumbled Billy. "Didn't know it was you." He pulled away and vanished among the shadows.

The clearing fell into a long decline with gentle slopes rising on either side, an admirable runway for night driving. All this had the earmarks of thoughtful planning. By the feel of the mass moving ahead, Reno judged that there were no more than a hundred head in the bunch, which was a two-or three-man job instead of a job needing the present twenty-odd hands. The extra hands, he concluded, were meant for trouble—the trouble that comes of moving stolen cattle by night.

This was an old story and he pieced out the rest of it with no great strain of thinking. The stock had been gathered a few head at a time, thrown into the secret pocket, and held there until the herd was made. What went on now was a drive to some receiver elsewhere in the hills who would push the beef

on to market. Big Lafe McMurtree, the descendent of captains and statesmen, had turned to this.

"You're letting me into the whole story, McMurtree," Reno remarked.

It was a long time before Big Lafe answered. "There was a date in history," he finally muttered, "when a brigand was considered a good citizen. Writers wrote stories about them. I don't hold any such illusions. A cattle thief is a cattle thief, which is what I am. But what lies behind all this is something you don't know. You see damned little of the story here. The rest will come soon enough."

A rider pushed his way back beside the old man and murmured something indistinct. Big Lafe said, "Turn short at Sweetgrass Creek and go across the bridge."

The rider went forward again and presently the momentum of the herd was temporarily checked. The flank men began to crowd against the cattle, romals slapping down. Reno, coming along the dusty rear, felt the ground shift upward and later downward as the trail bent. At the end of three tedious miles Reno found the unbroken expanse of the prairie lying below and beyond. He knew then where he was, for in the distance—in the far western distance—the lights of Blackrock winked through the gloom.

These cattle, he thought, were probably rustled from that prairie. Now they're going back to the prairie. Which is damned odd.

Hardly had he come to the conclusion when a signal flash appeared off to the immediate left—a lantern uncloaked and held high. In another moment it was concealed again, but the circling McMurtree hands had seen the warning and instantly began rounding

the herd to check it. The light appeared again, more briefly; a rider came back from the head of the column and reined in beside Big Lafe.

The'dore's voice said:

"Well, sir?"

"Come along," answered Big Lafe.

The two of them turned abreast and aimed for that point where the light had been. Reno, mind racing down the channels of his own scheming, wheeled and retreated a good fifty yards. Here he halted.

There's the receiver of the stolen goods, he thought. Him with the light. But what the hell? What's the point in running the beef back to where it came from?

Once the light rose straight from the earth and he dimly viewed the form of that third party, the receiver. Then the light went out. There was a parley going on, a very short parley terminated by Big Lafe's voice calling calmly back, "All right, boys."

The hands began to drift toward Reno. The job was done, the transfer made. On the sharp lookout, Reno saw Big Lafe and The'dore appear in the night.

If I want to get out of this outfit, Reno warned himself, here is the best chance I'll ever have. If I stay on, I'll have The'dore to handle before another day's done.

All the McMurtree hands, however, had gathered a few yards away and were sitting still in their saddles, queerly still and speechless. Big Lafe and The'dore advanced at a trot, but within the length of ten yards one of them—Reno thought it was The'dore—swerved aside and went on at a slightly faster pace. A low, cautious call rose from the McMurtree ranks.

"Say—Lafe. Where are the rest of

those fellows?"

"It is none of our business where they are," answered Lafe, now turning beside Reno. "Our job is done. Come on."

The'dore's lunging yell came from behind the cattle furiously:

"Watch out—watch out!"

And then the night burst with the stunning reverberations of a chasm falling in. A stuttering roar of gunfire smashed the calm of the hillside and the echoes bounded off the earth enormously. Stripes of crimson painted the darkness a hundred yards off to the eastward, over in the direction the receiver had been. Dust rose around Reno, dust kicked up by the thudding lead. A McMurtree hand cried out as if his heart were breaking and the ponies began pitching in a senseless, jammed-up confusion. A form raced at Reno, cursed his blackest rage, and went screaming to the ground. The herd broke like water through a caving dam, thundering off toward the valley. Somewhere, farther away than before, The'dore yelled again, the meaning of his words quite lost.

Reno crouched low in the leather, watching that long row of flame points glow and die and glow. In that fraction of time he knew there was only one answer—a quick retreat. He curbed his pitching horse and pushed beside Big Lafe, who seemed to have been stricken to the spot.

"Here—get out of this! Call your boys out of it!"

But Big Lafe had no answer. The old man was sitting stiff in the saddle and he was facing the fire. Reno reached over to catch the reins of the other's pony and missed. He had no second chance for the McMurtree hands broke and came racing on. The weight of

that flight carried Reno away from Big Lafe. His horse was bumped dead on, went to its knees, and got up again. Some of the McMurtree crew began to answer the shots, aiming with unthinking recklessness, and the heavy blast of one of their guns stung Reno's neck.

Meanwhile the opposing fusillade was veering, coming closer. Slugs struck all around him. Another McMurtree rider fell, shouting up from beneath the mad, churning hoofs. Reno was hit again by a passing horse and then, knowing he had lost all contact with Big Lafe, he hauled his mount around and fought through the press of brute and man. He literally plowed a trail into the clear, to find himself eventually alone on the margin of some stunted pines.

The firing fell short of him. The McMurtree outfit had left the open. Soon he detected a shift in the fighting. The sounds from the ambushers subsided considerably and while he sat there in the saddle, detached and coolly considering, he made out a turning movement of those ambushers. They halted the barrage of lead completely for as long a space as it took to draw half a dozen deep breaths. Then suddenly—for everything happened with whip-lash speed—a long and strung-out shadow undulated across the far edge of the open area and vanished down the grade. At that the McMurtrees began to halloo like hounds on the scent. They gathered in the brush, came out of it and flung themselves by the immovable Reno; and presently they too were lost off there on the heels of the ambushers. An occasional shot's echo rose to mark their running.

"They'll be scattered all over the hills from now till daylight," he said.

CHAPTER SIX

Cross Play

"And a lot of blood will be left in the sand." Then, poised with all his senses probing the night, he was aware of a stir on the lower edge of the clearing. Instinctively Reno bent forward and placed a hand over the nostrils of his pony, seeing a shadow drift up and halt. All he made out was a tall form on a horse, and even that was presently blurred as the man circled the clearing once and then went off at a drumming speed to the eastward.

Reno gathered up the reins and swung around the other way.

I've got to go back to the ranch, he decided grimly, and come to a show-down with those boys. If I run now they'll hunt me all through the hills and I'll get nothing done. Then an entirely different thought displaced the lesser ones in his mind and he dwelt on it with a studied interest and an increasing suspicion. The'dore got behind the protection of the cattle before the firing started. When he shouted he was away off from the trouble. When he shouted the second time he was still farther off. I wonder if it was The'dore who crossed the clearing just now?

He carried that wonder all the way to a high point of the hills and then dismissed it in face of a more immediate consideration, which was to find the way back to the ranch. One ridge and another fooled him, a half-dozen trails led him into the blindness of untraveled canyons. When at last he picked up the clear light of the McMurtree house, the sky overhead was paling and day hovered just below the eastern rim. There was no sign of life in the yard and no evidence of returned hands. He opened the door and strode inside, to find Big Lafe standing by a dying fire with the girl beside him.



BIG LAFE made no gesture, but he said harshly, "So you came back!"

"What else was there to do?" asked Reno, crossing the room.

"You might have kept going," muttered Big Lafe.

A sudden break of light appeared on the girl's solemn cheeks. There was an actual blaze of feeling in her eyes as she turned to the old man.

"I knew he would!" she cried. "I told you he would! He had no part in that trap!"

"No," said Reno. "I didn't."

"You might have kept going," repeated Big Lafe.

"Sure. And that would have clinched me with your boys. I couldn't stay in the hills that way. They'd hunt me all over hell's half acre."

"You consider they'll believe you for a minute?" Big Lafe asked. And he answered his own question with a shake of his head. "No. You're done for on this ranch."

"You're giving me my walkin' papers?"

"For your own good," he answered.

Reno reached for his cigarette tobacco and shook out a smoke, scowling over the job. When he looked up there was an added sharpness of expression on his face.

"It fits better into my plans to stay here and tough it through."

"I knew you had your own irons in the fire," observed Big Lafe. "That stuck out all over you."

Reno looked to the girl, but she

shook her head slightly. Then he asked:

"Men aren't back? No, I didn't suppose they would be. They'll be scattered forty miles all ways and drag in one at a time. I don't get this ambush stuff, but it'll come to me sooner or later. Seems to be more crooked turns to the road than I figured." He lighted a match and touched it to the cigarette tip. His eyes were bright and hard. "McMurtree, your foreman is a scoundrelly dog."

"I knew that," said Big Lafe.

"So?" grunted Reno. "You already knew it? And you keep him on?"

Big Lafe nodded and Reno, watching the old man's face, said reflectively, "So it's like that? You've got him and you can't get shut of him. He's too much to fire."

Big Lafe gave him no answer, yet Reno saw agreement written on that bold, tired face. Big Lafe squared his shoulders and let out a deep hreath.

"Reno," he said. "I know you're not a crook. I also know you've got a level head. What I don't know is how good a fighter you are. But that's your risk, not mine. How about it?"

"What do you want done?" was Reno's prompt answer.

"I want you to go tell Vilas to draw off quick. If he don't there'll be another war. I can't stop my boys, and I don't want to see them killed. Vilas has got to draw out."

"Vilas?" asked Rae. "What has he to do with us? He's no friend of ours."

"It is something even you don't know," said Big Lafe wearily. "Reno, you've caught on?"

"I sort of suspected the message Vilas sent you was misleading," drawled Reno.

"It was not a threat," agreed Big

Lafe. "It was an arrangement. The key of it was his reference to the base of Drum Peak. That is where we went tonight with the cattle."

"I don't understand," said the girl.

"It had better be explained now," was Big Lafe's grim answer. "You've always known we rustled stock off the prairie, Rae."

"Yes," said the girl in a low voice. "I have."

"There is no excuse for thieving," muttered Big Lafe. "I make none for myself. But it's been in my mind to make an end to it a long while. I would have done so, except that The'dore came along. My counsel of moderation was no good against The'dore. He could always stir the boys' desire for revenge to a crazy pitch. Now he thinks he's bigger than I am. I begin to believe he is."

"He is," said Reno bluntly.

"But what about Vilas?" asked the girl.

"Years ago Vilas was the leader against me in the war. Since I have come to the hills he's continued this leadership—apparently. But some few years back he came secretly to me and said we might both profit. The man's a crook and a sly one. He suggested I enlarge the rustlin' business. Steal from everybody on the plain, including himself. Then he'd arrange to take the rustled stuff at fit occasions and market it. It was an easy way for me to make money. Nobody ever suspected Vilas, of course, because he had helped drive me out of the plain. He had only one man he let into the secret, which was this foreman of his, Hale Wolfert. Wolfert handles everything. Wolfert's got his own separate crew, who consider it a deal that Wolfert is puttin' over on Vilas and everybody else. Nobody

on our side knows of it, except The'dore. The rest of the boys are in the dark. All they know is that somebody comes up after night, meets me, and gets the beef. They've never even seen Wolfert's face."

The girl slowly turned away, walked to the far side of the fireplace. Big Lafe watched her out of his fine, troubled eyes, and he said gently:

"I make no excuses, Rae. I will say I have tried to stop. But The'dore holds the whip over the boys now. Not me."

"Then get rid of him!" said the girl with a sudden anger.

"I am older than I thought I was," Big Lafe answered, and in that answer Reno heard a profound sadness. He threw his cigarette into the fire.

"All right, I'll go tell Vilas."

"And then what?" demanded the girl. "We're no better off. The'dore is still here. What will we do?"

"I'll come back," said Reno, the words dropping softly into the stillness of that great room. "And maybe we can figure it out."

"You'll never be safe on this ranch," warned Big Lafe.

"I have known very little safety in the last few years," reflected Reno, looking into the fire. "And mighty little sense of comfort. What's the odds? I came here to do a chore. This business fits in. That's all, the whole story of it. So long till I see you again."

He went across the room and out the door to his horse. But he had not yet turned away when he heard the girl calling to him. She came over the porch and stood at the animal's side, looking up with her oval features dimly outlined in the gray dawn. Her hand touched him.

"Jim," she whispered, "you're riding

among hard men. The hardest men in the world. Whatever you've done that was wrong, I don't care! But you've got to look out for yourself. If you go out, what is there left—for me?"

"I'll be back," murmured Reno.

He rode off across the meadow, down the little trail. At the end of two miles he came to the Morgantown-Blackrock road just as the sunless morning broke about him and the mist weaths began to evaporate. He rode rapidly, tense in expectation of the unexpected. When he topped the heights, he deserted the trail altogether and pushed downward through heavy brush and sapling stands. At sunup he turned a bend and came upon a glade encircled by thick virgin timber. As he did so all the force of surprise drove his rein arm into a checking gesture.

Ahead—only a hundred feet ahead—Hale Wolfert crouched over a small fire. The sound of Reno's approach was faint, yet it stiffened the man instantly. He shot to his full, ungainly height and whirled about, reaching for the blackened gun butt at his side. Reno, coldly realizing there was no other course open, swayed in the saddle and made a swift grab for his own weapon. As his fingers closed about it, he heard a vindictive voice come from behind him.

"You're covered. Stop the draw."

It took Reno off his guard, it completed his rout. All he could do was check his try. Completely covered—for Wolfert's gun had risen to a steady aim—he understood now that his only chance of survival rested on the deliberateness of his surrender. That moment became an hour and the silence went flat and breathless. Mastering the savage impulse to make a fight of it, he slowly dragged his hand from the

gun and turned still more slowly in the saddle to face the rear man.

It was The'dore. The'dore's eyes were red slashes and his mouth was a pale crease.

"Put up your hands," said The'dore. "Put 'em up as high as you've ever reached."

Reno started to obey. Then the morning split apart and a long echo swelled up the canyon. Wolfert had fired. Reno felt something strike the side of his head with all the stunning effect of a club. The world faded and he fell without a murmur, the strength going out of him. As from an enormous distance he heard the gun roar again. After that he knew nothing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Wolf Pack



WHEN he came out of the deep stupor a dull ache knocked against his head in rhythm with his pulse and the bitter taste of blood was in his mouth. All the side of his face was wet. His battered nerves were trembling along shoulder and neck. He felt weak, very weak, and so for a while he made no attempt to move or to open his eyes. That—the sense of being detached from himself—was what saved him. The pervading silence into which he wakened was a moment later broken by a voice, and that voice acted on him in the manner of water thrown over his face. It screwed his faculties up and even checked the throbbing of his brain. Motionless, eyes closed, he identified those harsh tones as The'dore's.

"... can't stay here forever, Wol-

fert. Won't do if some of the McMurtree boys stumble into us."

"We've got to talk this out."

"Talk it quick then. Your shots made a hell of a racket—and didn't do much good either. Reno's only creased. He'll pull himself together pretty soon. Then what're we going to do with him?"

"If he hadn't swung around when I fired I'd got him right in the gizzard."

"Which has nothin' to do with the facts. What'll we do with him? He's onto us. We can't let him pack that secret around."

"Maybe the next slug will land better," said Wolfert slowly, suggestively.

Reno heard those words trail into the dreamy stillness of the morning. The men were behind him. Knowing this, he opened his eyes a little and saw his horse standing twenty yards off, cropping the grass. The'dore spoke with a rough hastiness.

"You do it, then."

"Leave it to me," said Wolfert.

"Damn, but you're a cool sport!"

"What's the difference?" droned Wolfert. "But we've got to talk this out. Our little play last night worked all right, didn't it?"

"I blamed near didn't get out of range before your men opened up. You might've waited another count of ten after I shouted."

"The boys was a little quick," admitted Wolfert. "I hadn't no more than stepped back from meetin' you and Big Lufe before they started the shootin'. The trouble was, your bunch started away from the clearin' quick and they'd been beyond hittin' in another second. If you want my opinion, Big Lufe acted cagey. It was the first time in several months he came along with the party."

"I thnk," said The'dore slowly, "that the bunch smelled somethng."

"Well, it will turn out just like we wanted it to turn out. The McMurtrees will figure they were led into a double cross. They'll go hog-wild. They'll start the war up again."

"No," contradicted The'dore. "They'll thnk some other rustlin' outfit timed it to cut in. They don't know who's behind the play. Big Lafe is the only one that knows about Vilas."

"That's where you come in," said Wolfert. "When you go back to the ranch you spill that. Say Vilas is in it. Say he arranged this affair. That'll make 'em ready to come down off the hills."

"Yeah? How would I know this? They'll ask me how I know."

"Easy," explained Wolfert. "You tell the McMurtrees you saw me and a couple other of Vilas's hands rushin' through the timber about daylight."

"That puts you in no comfortable position."

"I'll keep out of the way," answered Wolfert dryly. "I can afford to take the chance in a game like this."

But The'dore was finding flaws. "Vilas," he said, "will drop you when he finds out you put on this show. It means the end of his arrangement with Big Lafe."

"Who's to tell him I put on the show?" demanded Wolfert. "I'll explain to him some other outfit cut in on us. No, I'll do better. I'll tell him some of your outfit double-crossed us. That will finish the Vilas-McMurtree agreement right there."

"How about your own particular crew of bunch-jumpers?"

"They never did know Vilas was in this rustling. All they know is that I'm running an independent game. They

won't talk. They can't afford to. I spent a lot of time pickin' those jugheads. There ain't a hand in the bunch that dares pull out—he'd never get clear."

"So you're fixed to go through with this?"

"We're fixed to go through with it," amended Wolfert.

Reno suffered a tremendous desire to move his cramped arms. The sun burned his skin and the dust bit at it; his throat stuck and he had to throw all his will against the impulse to cough. His gun had been taken—that much he knew from the lack of weight on his right hip. Yet occupied as he was by the physical torment, he followed each man's talk with a puzzled attention. It was clear enough that they were in partnership for some design of their own. What he could not arrive at was the nature of the design.

The'dore was talking again with a reluctance that at once stamped him as the weaker of the two. It was he that held back and offered objections, while Wolfert relentlessly argued them aside.

"There's two men you'll never fool," said The'dore. "This Reno—"

"I'll take care of him," cut in Wolfert.

"And Big Lafe," added The'dore. "Big Lafe is too smart not to guess what it's all about."

"Then you take care of him."

"Not so fast," protested The'dore, "I can swing the outfit against him. I can take the authority away from him. Any time I want. They'll listen to me when I say, 'Let's go wipe out the desert.' I can do that. But I can't frame Big Lafe and draw on him. You've got to remember all those boys have got a little of Lafe's family blood in them. They wouldn't stand for it a minute."

"Then," said Wolfert with a grunt of finality, "I'll take care of him."

"How?"

"Leave that to me. But we're ready to go on to the next stage of the game. You go back to the ranch. Talk the outfit up to the killin' point. Tomorrow night go down and raid Blackrock. Rip it to pieces and draw back home again. That shouldn't be so hard. Tomorrow's Tuesday and there'll be few punchers in town. But the attack will put every prairie rancher on the warpath. They'll organize and bring a party up to attack McMurtree. Then the ball is open, my friend—high, wide, and handsome. And while all this is going on, there'll be damned few hands watching the stock on the range. I'll have my boys comb it clean. Ain't that simple enough? The McMurtrees will get the blame for doing it. You and I will clean up a young fortune."

"While the scrap lasts," grumbled The'dore.

"It will last a long time. The last war went on for two years. That's where Vilas made his money. Nibbled off the cattle from the ranches which were too busy fighting to watch their own business."

At that instant Reno saw the whole thing clearly. He wondered at his own failure in not understanding it before. During a range war all bars were down. Anything could happen, as Hale Wolfert meant should happen now. But again The'dore was arguing.

"I'm to lead these fellows into Blackrock?"

"You've got to take a chance once in a while," pointed out Wolfert impatiently. "What ails you? All you do is keep the McMurtrees scrapping and running. I do the rest. You get your profits out of me. That ain't the whole

story, either. When this thing is finished, we may have the prairie outfits ready to make a dicker for peace. Thirty men, you want to realize, can run a whole county ragged. Well, if it works out that way you'll be the king pin in the hills. Big Lafe will be dead or he'll have no more authority over his men. Point is, keep the lads whipped up. They're a hard bunch and they like to fight."

"We've done enough palaverin'."

"It's settled then. Tomorrow night you ride."

"Yeah," agreed The'dore with no great enthusiasm. "But we've got to do something about Reno."

Reno went cold. He heard the two approach, boots scuffing the soft dirt. One of them walked around. The other stood in back. Through the narrow slit of his eyelids he saw a pair of legs within reach of his arms, and he knew then what he would do. It was a thin chance, but all that he had.

"Get it over with," said The'dore nervously. "Me, I don't care for cold turkey."

There was a long pause. Wolfert, behind, wasn't moving and there was no sound of an arm reaching for a gun. Reno's nerves were like threads of ice and he set his mind for the outward lunge that was to bring The'dore down by the heels. Then he heard Wolfert saying reflectively:

"No-o, I got a better idea. I'll take him along. He may be a help to me."

Reno, relaxing, was not prepared for what followed. Wolfert let out a grunt and struck with his boot, catching Reno in the small of the back.

"You!" snapped Wolfert. "Come out of it!"

Reno's head rolled and he dug the nails of his fingers deep into his palms

to hold himself from springing up. He opened his eyes, staring directly into Wolfert's lowered face.

"Get up," said Vilas's foreman.

Reno pulled himself to his knees, staggered to his feet. A gray blur passed across the day and he thought he was falling. Wolfert seized him and shook him about with a vindictive pleasure.

"Come out of it—you're lucky to be here! I've had two chances at you and didn't take 'em. If you ever get out of this, Reno, you'll maybe learn a little something about dellverin' messages."

The'dore swung around and walked off to his horse. "Too much talk, Wolfert," he said over his shoulder, and then climbed to the saddle. A moment later he vanished around the bend.

"Get aboard," said Vilas's foreman.

"I don't know," murmured Reno tentatively, "what this is all about, but—"

Wolfert's broad and challenging face hardened. He rapped out swiftly, "Oh, yes you do! You know damned well what it's about."

Reno let the talk drop. A sweeping reaction took hold of him and the ache in his head ran through his muscles, leaving him faint and dispirited. It was a real effort to get into the saddle and wheel around. At Wolfert's gesture, he crossed the glade, passed between the great pines and presently hit a shadowed trail that looped downward. Thus by degrees they descended from the hill country proper and entered the more open folds of the bench. Going over a meadow marked by sagging rail fences, they entered a thicket of willows, forded a shallow creek sparkling with sunlight, and then pushed into a wider and more gentle clearing studded by the gray, unpainted Benton houses. There seemed to be no life

about these, but when they drew abreast of the porch of the main house, a thin-figured little man appeared and stood attentively by.

"Put him in the back bedroom," said Wolfert.

Reno walked through the doorway. He did not pause in the shattered front room, but instead went on along a hall to its end and turned to the left and through another doorway. When he swung around he found the little man studying him with a roused curiosity.

"Seem to know your way about," said the fellow.

Reno only shrugged his shoulders, yet he realized he had made a mistake. The little man opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, and closed the door. Reno stood a long while in the center of the room, hearing the other walk back to the front of the place. Meanwhile, his eyes traveled from wall to wall, from the scarred floor to the water-stained ceiling, and his features darkened and grew more embittered. Here, in bygone years, he had lived and slept and played as a child. This ruin now staring him in the face hit him hard; it was the last outrage, the final bit of desolation and sacrilege. There was a shapeless bunk in one corner and a rat-eaten mattress on it. He lay on it full length, face downward.

He fell asleep, never realizing how greatly the wear and tear of the recent hours had drained his vitality. When he awoke it was with a quick tensing of muscles, with a sudden shock. The room was full of shadows and there was the sound of many men talking in the front part of the house. Turning half over, he saw the little man crouched beside the bed, a queer, cat-

like look of absorption on the thin and evil cheeks. At Reno's abrupt rise, the little man swung alertly back.

"Brother," said he admiringly, "you sure let the cares of the world go to hell. I could've shot a cannon over you unbeknownst. Feel some better?"

Reno was astonished at the change in himself. He had come to this room miserable in mind and body. Standing erect now, he felt the old freshness of spirit course through him like fire. He was sharp-witted again, full of hope, sure of himself. But all he said to the little man was: "What time is it?"

"Toward evenin'," said the little man. "Not that it should make any difference to you. You're wanted out front."

Reno went through the door and down the hall. The little man followed with a covert warning. "Mind your talk. Wolfert's on the prod." Then Reno came into the front room and paused to find himself bracketed by the eyes of eight or ten of the hardest, most lawless faces he had ever seen.

A fire burned in a sheet-iron stove and a lantern on a center table threw out an uneven light, only half touching those figures posted around the walls. The talk ceased instantly. A treacherous silence rushed across the room. Reno, reaching for his tobacco, saw them stiffen, saw their cheeks take on a smooth expressionless mask. It was as if he had challenged them by his appearance. Certainly they were on guard. Running his own glance around, Reno saw Wolfert in a remote corner. Wolfert, finding himself spotted, suddenly broke the spell.

"Well—anybody ever see this man before?"

Silence came again, increasingly weighted with sullen antagonism.

Reno, feeling the weight of it, lit a match to his cigarette.

"Skinny—you ever see him before?"

The little man who had acted as messenger came from behind Reno, slowly shaking his head. "No, Hale. I ain't ever."

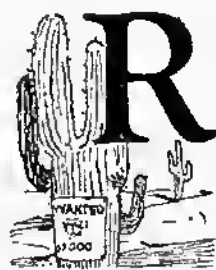
Another hand broke in. "If he's somebody we had ought to know, who is he?"

But Wolfert walked to the center of the room.

"Nobody," he rapped out. "I've got to ride. This fellow goes with me. Skinny, get his horse. Put out that fire and put out the lamp. Everybody stay close at hand till I get back. Keep ridin' the edges of this clearin', but don't let me catch any of you strayin' beyond bounds. Hear that? And if there's any sinell of trouble up in the trees, don't go after it. Drift away to shelter and wait."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Golden Horns



RENO followed out, glad to be away from that room. He swung up, fell in beside Wolfert, and matched the other's easy canter across the clearing. Through another belt of trees, they came to the crest of the bench and saw all the vast prairie below fading beneath the dark. Over in the west Blackrock's lights began to glitter and wink.

"Reno, except for one thing, you'd never have left that house again. I'm tellin' you that. Bear it in mind, because you've got to play with me the next couple of hours or I'll smash you in your tracks."

"What seems to be your trouble now?" Reno asked dryly.

"Vilas wants to see me—and you."

"Me? How does he know I'm in your hands?"

Wolfert's answer came back with a throaty savageness. "I'd like to know that myself. The fact's got to him, and he wants to see you. Now listen to this. You're going to keep your mouth shut. Answer his questions, but under no consideration offer any free information. Get the idea?"

"I get the idea."

"Thought you would," replied Wolfert. "You're nobody's fool and I'm not deceivin' myself about what you've picked up the last twenty-four hours. I ain't askin' how much you've stowed away under your hat. I don't give a damn. Nor will I tell you how to handle yourself in front of the questions Vilas shoots at you. I don't know what he's got in his system, either. Take care of yourself the best you can."

"You're coachin' me," reflected Reno, "as if I was on your side of the fence. You know better, Wolfert. Why should I do a string of lyin' for you?"

"Make a break in front of him," promised Wolfert, "and I'll see you dead!"

"Might be a hitch in that."

"Wait a minute," interposed Wolfert. "There's another angle to it. I happen to know that you're playin' your own game, too."

"Maybe," admitted Reno. "But that's got nothing to do with you."

"Yes, it has, I tell you. You be reasonable with me and I can put you on to something you want to know. A promise?"

"I wouldn't tie up with you for a million dollars," grunted Reno. "Not with your brand of crookedness."

He thought he had stretched his luck pretty far, but Wolfert seemed strangely anxious over the coming interview and remained insistently mild.

"Not askin' you to tie up with me. The deal is only to cover what happens in front of Vilas. Your promise don't hold beyond that. I can get along without you afterward. As far as I'm concerned, I'll be through with you and you'll be through with me."

"Free to play hide-and-run again, that it?" queried Reno.

"Just so."

It was an ironic thought. Reno chuckled.

"Your friend The'dore would thank you for the dicker, Wolfert."

"Never mind," cut in Wolfert. "I'll handle that."

"You're pretty sure of yourself," said Reno. "But it's a bet."

"Good. In front of Vilas I'll do all the talking. You stick to yes and no answers. And here's the one thing I don't want Vilas to know—that I'm friendly with The'dore. You were in that scrap last night. All right. Remember that it was the McMurtree boys who started the shootin'."

"Agreed."

"Here's my part of the bargain," Wolfert said abruptly. "You ask Vilas what time it is."

"What's that?" demanded Reno.

But Wolfert had no more to offer. He shut up like a trap and spurred away at a faster clip. Reno, in the rear, experienced an odd sensation in his brain. Something long ago forgotten moved out of memory's grave and was alive again. He swore under his breath at his failure to grasp it, laid the tip of his rowels across the pony's flanks, and shot on.

The compact with Wolfert stung his

pride. Even though it had been made at the point of force, it belittled him to himself and made the future even more complicated. The whole affair was increasingly tangled with the soiled threads of deceit and greed and evil. He stood at a point from which he might survey the uneasy relations of all these men in the worst light. Wolfert, the strongest and the most brazen, mirrored the rest in his ruthless and contemptuous attitude of dog-eat-dog. Reno had no illusions concerning the man. Wolfert was now using him. When his usefulness was ended, Wolfert would end him.

Blackrock's lights stretched out on the desert to meet them and the outlines of the houses broke through the desert shadow. Wolfert circled about the town and advanced on its southern side. Dismounting in the gloom of an abandoned shed, he waited for Reno to come along. Of a sudden his voice was metallic and domineering.

"By God, Reno, you go through with this!"

"I'll carry the interview through," said Reno indifferently. "After that, Wolfert, I'll be looking out for myself."

Wolfert let out a gusty breath and said, "All right. Come on."

He walked straight into the blankness of the building shadows and Reno felt a touch of surprise at the big fellow's lightness of step. Wolfert's knuckles tapped gently on a wall; a door opened on a rectangular yellow glow. Pete Vilas's tall frame strode across the light and vanished. Then Wolfert went in and Reno followed, closing the door behind. This was again the room behind the saloon bar; Vilas stood in a corner of it, his Yankee face shrewdly, non-committally set.

"Hale, where did you get Reno?"

"Found him scoutin' the country this morning," Wolfert said cautiously, "so I took him to camp."

"Why?"

"I told you the other night I don't trust him. Who told you I got him?"

But the foreman's question failed to be casual. A deep, sulky resentment was in it. Vilas grinned.

"You'd like to know that, wouldn't you? Didn't figure I had my ears cocked that far up in the hills. Well, what happened?"

Wolfert eyed Vilas with a dull regard. "Trouble. The McMurtrees are gettin' ambitious. When we come to get the beef they shot us off the slope. That's the end of that business, Pete."

"McMurtree started the shooting?" broke out Vilas, all his features growing pinched. "McMurtree did?"

"Yeah. I told you that game couldn't last."

Vilas said explosively, "What took you so long in comin' to tell me?"

"I've been all day roundin' up the boys. They were scattered all over the map. The McMurtrees ain't quit lookin' for us yet."

Vilas had no immediate answer, but he kept staring at Wolfert until the latter's dark face changed.

"What are you goin' to do about it?" demanded Wolfert. "Sit and take it? Or go clean that country out?"

"Leave that to me," said Vilas. "What was your idea about Reno?"

"To keep him where I'd have my eyes on him," grumbled Wolfert. "I don't trust him. You want him roaming around the country, knowin' what he docs?"

"Depends on what he knows," answered Vilas. "Wolfert, go out front and bring George here."

Wolfert went to the inner door. He

was opening it when something occurred to him. He looked back swiftly.

"What's that for?"

"I'm going to start the ball rolling. Get George."

Wolfert nodded and went on, closing the door behind. Almost instantly Vilas turned on his heel and walked to the little table in the room. He pulled out a drawer, took a forty-five from within, and shoved it across the table's top.

"That's yours, Reno."

Reno reached for it, puzzled. Then his hand snapped back and his eyes hardened against that gun, the butt of which held a star and crescent of pearl. This was the weapon he had taken from the dying Two-bits.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"Recognize it, do you?" drawled Vilas. "Thought you would. Never mind how I got it. Shove it in your holster."

Reno's mind gripped fast to a growing suspicion—that he was being framed. Deliberately he pulled away from the thought, knowing that it made no difference. The possession of a gun answered all arguments. His fingers closed about the butt. He snapped open the cylinder, satisfied himself as to the loads, and shook the cylinder into its seat. Vilas's face had changed again and now carried a look of bitter purpose about it. All the surface show of good humor had gone. Reno dropped the gun to his holster.

"What for?" he asked.

"You know what Wolfert would've done to you?"

"Yes."

"Well, here's your answer. When he comes back, it's your say-so."

"Vilas," said Reno, "I've run a lot of errands lately, but I draw the line on

hiring out as a killer. He's your foreman, not mine."

"Never mind. When he sees you've got a gun—"

"Lost your faith in him, Vilas?"

"I was wondering how long it would take him to figure out his trick," said Vilas.

"I've got a message for you," Reno said. "McMurtree told me to ask you to draw out of this mess. He can't stop his men from raising hell. Maybe you can stop yours."

"One of Wolfert's boys fired the first shot?"

"All of Wolfert's boys fired first," amended Reno dryly.

"I thought so. Well, they'll never be stopped till Wolfert's stopped."

He was studying Reno with a slanting shrewdness, his own secretive purposes lending a hooded quality to the brilliance of the sharp eyes. Returning the stare, Reno understood he was being played for a puppet again. He thought then of another thing. Backing to a far corner, he took a stand.

"What time is it, Vilas?"

"Toward nine," said Vilas and reached for his watch.

The movement of his arm pushed aside his coat front, exposing the heavy length of chain looped through a vest button hole and caught there by a crossbar of gold made in the form of a steer's horns. Tipping the watch in his palm, he announced the time.

"Half past nine. Why?"

Reno started to speak, the words as dry as crackling paper. "Vilas, you're—"

But he was cut off by the opening of the door. Wolfert came in alone, closed the portal behind him.

"George is down the street somewhere," he explained. Straightening

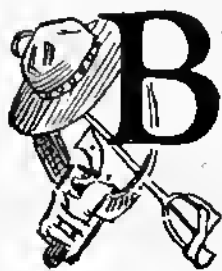
around he looked first at Vilas, saw something in the old man's face, and whirled his big body flat against the wall. His attention flashed to Reno. He saw the gun, and his cheeks went pale.

"Hale," said Vilas with a slurred softness, "you're a cheap crook and never did own brains enough to fool me. I've called you."

Wolfert said slowly, "You've walked into your own trap, Pete. Look close at that man. He was a little kid when you saw him last, before he came back here. I recognized him and you didn't. Why, you damned fool, there's the son of Hi Benton come back to find out who shot and killed his dad sixteen years ago. You're smart, Pete. Yeah, very smart. He's lookin' at you."

CHAPTER NINE

The End of a Man



BACKED against the wall, the man who had been Jim Reno now became Jim Benton in one sweep of changing circumstances. All the old fences he had built up around Jim

Benton, all the safeguards and screens with which he had hidden that man fell away.

Something inside him brimmed over during that fractional minute of betrayal. The even balance of his mind tipped, and the last dissenting scruple at bloodshed died there in the hushed suspense that began to grow intolerable. He had sworn to himself that he would never resume his true identity until he had found the killer of his father; and here and now that purpose was apparently fulfilled. No reason was left for carrying on the false

name, and he saw that even if he wished to continue as Reno, he could not. He stood exposed to these two people and presently would be exposed to all the desert and all the hills.

The energy of his body flooded along his arms and into his brain—and left the rest of his muscles inert and helpless. In effect he became a machine of destruction set on trigger tension, waiting for the impulse that would release the dammed-up rage and drive him into gunplay. For it was clear to him now that this pair could never afford to let him go. Whatever their own quarrels, they would unite in an effort to get him.

Wolfert seemed actually at ease, as if he enjoyed watching Vilas suffer. There was no doubt of the cattleman's shock. The sly, sharp features went pallid, the nut-shaped head sagged, and the scheming eyes flashed out with wildness akin to the desperation of a trapped beast. Then he made the effort of pulling himself together. Straightening, he said thickly:

"You're Hi Benton's kid?"

"Yes," droned Benton. "I'm the Benton kid that drove out of the country sixteen years ago with his mother, in a borrowed wagon and ten dollars of charity money."

Vilas said something strange. "How's that mother of yours? I always wondered about her, poor soul."

"She died six months ago. That's why I'm here. You've had a long breathing spell, Vilas. But it's over now."

"Look here, boy," said Vilas, a little more sure of himself, "why talk that way to me? I'm the man that lent your mother the wagon and the ten dollars. You're barkin' up the wrong tree."

"What time is it, Vilas?" demanded

Benton.

Vilas started to reach for his watch, then went rigid again, one finger hooked around the chain. "What in hell—"

"That gold longhorn charm you carry," said Benton evenly, "belonged to my dad. You're pretty raw, Vilas. Must be fifty people around Blackrock who know about that charm."

Wolfert broke in sardonically. "But not fifty people that gave a damn what happened to Hi Benton, my friend. Or could afford to take issue with Pete here, even if they did care. Anyhow, Pete always was fond of souvenirs. He gave you another souvenir—which is that gun Two-bits owned."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," pleaded Vilas. "If it's the charm that's worryin' you, Benton, I can damn soon explain it. I bought it off a puncher five years ago."

"Bought Two-bits's gun also, I reckon?" queried Wolfert, more and more jeering. "You don't lie well, Pete, because you never had to practice the trick."

Vilas almost shook his fist at Wolfert. "You know where that gun came from, you hound! You stole it from Benton's saddlebags the other night and brought it here!"

"What should I steal it for?" rapped out Wolfert.

"Maybe you like to collect your scalps," cried Vilas. "Don't pull the wool over my eyes! I can guess who killed Two-bits and I can guess why!"

Wolfert's single word was flat and toneless. "Why?"

"To rile the McMurtrees, bring on the war again, and feather your own nest!" said Vilas. "I told you there wasn't an idea in your head I couldn't read."

"You've got Benton to answer now," said Wolfert.

They turned on him and Benton saw the anger and the heat go out of their faces, replaced by a dragging worry. The oppressive silence came again and he could feel the weight of their thoughts. A moment ago the issue had been clear-cut and his own decision made; now he was not so sure of Vilas's guilt. Vilas shifted on his feet and carefully raised a hand to wipe a damp forehead. Shrewdness sprang gleaming into his eyes again and he began talking in a smooth, persuasive manner.

"Look here, Benton. Use your own judgment. I've played this game a good many years and never made an error. I hire men to do my chores. I don't do 'em myself. All those hands working for Wolfert are really working for me. Wolfert's fetched and carried going on twenty years. Figure that out. I never killed your dad. He'd been busted soon enough, which was all I wanted. But Wolfert got to thinking that the easiest way was to knock him over. Wolfert did that."

Wolfert's swarthy features showed a plain cruelty, but he held his temper back. "You're carryin' that watch charm, Pete, not me," he said.

"Take it or leave it," said Vilas, directing his words at Benton. "Now what are you going to do about it?"

"Where is your gun?" asked Benton.

The cattleman's answer raced back across the room. "I don't carry a gun."

Benton swung his attention to Wolfert. "Then it seems to be you and me," he said grimly.

Wolfert's shoulders rolled forward and he visibly settled. "What's that mean? You want to call the number right now?"

Benton shook his head. "Not this time. I'll pick my own ground when we go to the smoke, Wolfert. I'll see you in the hills. I'm getting out of Blackrock—now."

But Wolfert's manner shifted and the blocky jaws came together stubbornly. "No."

"You want it here?"

"Right here," grunted Wolfert, and cast a quick side glance at Vilas.

Vilas got that warning and his reply was to turn himself more squarely toward Benton. At the same time he took a backward step, placing Wolfert so much the more distant from him. And as he did so, Benton realized the cattleman had lied about possessing a gun. Both of them were going for him.

"All right," Benton said evenly. "Let 'er rip."

"I'm out of it," called Vilas.

"You lie," retorted Benton. "You've got a gun under your left armpit."

Wolfert looked as if he was about to spring; his heavy lips were thinned against each other and a pale streak deepened on either side of his nose.

"Call it," he rasped.

"Your party," Benton told him.

"I'm out of it!" shouted Vilas, and deliberately turned his back to Benton. He had weakened at the last moment. Wolfert started to curse; his elbows crawled higher and the fingers of his right hand began to spread apart. But Benton was watching the man's eyes and he saw something in them that defined the next step for him. He said:

"I'm going to slide to the back door and go out of it, Wolfert."

"You'll never touch that knob," warned the Vilas foreman. "I—"

"What's that?" cried Vilas, making a full turn.

A tray had fallen in the saloon with a banging noise and a table went over. Somebody shouted, "The east end of the street!" at the top of his voice. After that those in the saloon stampeded for the front door.

There was a shot, a lone shot that sent a flat echo across town, and then Benton heard the rush and pound of horsemen storming into Blackrock. The saloon building shook with the reverberation; a man's boots made a clatter through the now deserted barroom and in another moment the intervening door was knocked open, to show a lithe young man paused breathless on the threshold. He had no hat and the color of excitement stained his neck a turkey red.

"Vilas—hey, Vilas, it's the McMurrees! I saw 'em a quarter mile down the road!"

The rest of his talk was overwhelmed by a long blast of gunfire. Without trying to finish his warning, the young man threw himself violently about and raced away. Wolfert's head rose from its fixed position and Benton saw the fellow's eyes mirror astonishment.

"Why," said Wolfert, "I told The-dore tomorrow night—not tonight!"

Vilas looked at the foreman, only looked. Then his turning arm came against the table lamp and swept it to the floor. It happened so rapidly that Benton's reactions were delayed. The light went out, or seemed to. At any rate the room turned dark, relieved only by the glow coming in from the barroom.

Vilas yelled, "You everlastin' fool!" and sprang through that door at the same moment Benton dropped to all fours.

Two things happened at once. The room throbbed with the roar of Wol-

fert's gun and the smashed lamp caught fire, the flame rising and racing along the path of the spilled oil. As he fell, Benton dragged the table with him for shelter, but this fresh light in the room laid him wide open and he had no choice of chances. Wolfert's bullets went high, screaming through the flimsy walls beyond; and then the general crash and batter of the McMurtree attack drowned out all else.

Righting himself, Benton came up from behind the table with his own weapon blasting a cover for him. But he had no need of it. Wolfert was gone. He had retreated into the barroom.

Benton made no more mistakes. Reaching behind, he opened the rear door and stepped into the dark, turning the next instant to hurdle all the junk piles on the back side of the town. He got to the horses, took his own by the bridle, and led it away, paralleling the buildings. A hundred yards to the east of the saloon, he left the pony with reins grounded and went up an alley at full run. At the street he halted and crouched in the shadows, a spectator watching the storm.

There was no doubt of the fighting rage of the McMurtrees. Their first attack had carried them all through the street and out the far end; they came back now at a rush, massed two and two, firing to either side. Window glass fell on porch top and sidewalk like jangling rain; the whine of lead ripping across the soft walls rose higher. From his covert, Benton saw light after light go out.

The McMurtrees were shouting from point to point, emptying the street. They abandoned their compact arrangement—Benton guessed they were feeling the tide go with them—and began to cut through the alleys in pairs,

to ride into the stores. The taint of burned powder drifted along the dark; muzzle flashes made weird glows. Once he thought he saw The'dore in the mad tangle, but a second glimpse revealed just another McMurtree.

Meanwhile, Blackrock began to rally; the opposition strengthened and appeared to collect at the saloon. A McMurtree fell out of the saddle in passing that point; another hill man's horse dropped from beneath him. Seeing that, the McMurtrees began to draw back into the deeper darkness. Benton thought they had enough and were retreating.

The same thought moved a few of the Blackrock citizens into the street again. But it was a mistake. The McMurtrees hurled themselves into the semi-light once more, the head of the column going like the point of a spear toward the saloon. The volleys blazed and crackled and then there was a resounding smash of horseflesh and wood as the McMurtrees struck the saloon at window and door and literally broke through. Benton, absolutely stuck to his tracks, shook an astonished head. He had never seen men battle like this before.

"Must be years of heartburn behind that," he muttered.

He saw now, casting a glance farther into the shadows, a lank figure rise from an alley and begin to throw bullets into that struggling mass by the saloon. Presently this man walked boldly into the street, refilling his gun. As he crossed a beam of light he stood identified: Pete Vilas, coolly taking up the scrap. Vilas snapped his cylinder shut and raised his gun with an amazing coldness of nerve. Benton did not hear the shot, drowned as it was by the torrent of sound all about him, but he

did see the gun kick back in the old man's fist, and he also saw the nut-shaped head nod as if in approval. Vilas tried again, stepped back a few paces, seemed to see some better chance, and pivoted to lay his sights down an alley.

But he never dropped the hammer on another cartridge; a gun cracked near at hand at Benton's right and Vilas, raising his face to the star-flecked sky above him, fell limply without a gesture. Benton recoiled and glanced quickly along his side of the street. He saw Hale Wolfert rise from his knees from beside the stable water trough and cut over the dust. The next moment he was out of sight.

That warned Benton as no other incident could have done. He was between fires, in an alien town that was attacked by men hostile to him. There was nothing left here for him to do. The next move was back to the hills, back to the McMurtree house before the crew got there. He retreated to the rear of the alley, got to his horse and climbed into the saddle.

Five minutes later he was a mile away from Blackrock, aiming for the bench. From that position he turned to see a long fan-shaped flare of yellow light sweep skyward. Blackrock was burning.

"And that is the end of Big Lefe's hope of peace," Benton said to himself. "Every man on the prairie will line up to raid the hills and get even. Here comes the war. And that's exactly what The'dore and Wolfert want to see. But I wonder why The'dore jumped the attack on Blackrock up a day, disregarding Wolfert's instructions?" Scowling at the long, black outline of the hills before him, he concluded: "I've about come to the end of

the drifting stage. It's time to make a stand for myself and let other people take care of their own business."

CHAPTER TEN

The Flame Spreads



AT THE high point of the bench he paused to survey Blackrock once again—a great shield of light spreading against the velvet opaqueness of the prairie and the horizon. The town was lost. It would be nothing but hot ashes by break of day, an insult offered by the McMurtrees for all the past injuries done them—and an insult that would draw the prairie's answer before the passing of another forty-eight hours. Looking steadily at the mark of ruin there, Benton saw what he had been particularly seeking. The McMurtree outfit, traveling at no great speed, came along the lane of light made by the fire, bound back for the hills. There was, as clearly as he could make out, no party of townsmen following.

He was a half hour in the lead and, continuing the climb, he set a pace intended to increase that advantage. He came to the plank bridge, began a sightless exploration for the lesser trail, found it, and after two hours or better from Blackrock, rode into the McMurtree meadow and heard the hound pack come baying forward.

The door of the big house opened immediately. Drawing abreast of the porch, he saw the girl framed there, her face darkly shadowed.

"Who is it?"

"Me," said Benton, and got down.

A quick expulsion of breath an-

swered him. Rae McMurtree turned half about and revealed a graven worry. She said rapidly, "Come in—come in, Jim!"

When he passed through, she closed and bolted the door. In this great room the scene never appeared to change. The fireplace rolled out its grateful heat, and Big Lafe stood with his back to it. Jim Benton went over, observing how the recent hours had aged this old man. Heavy lines ran down the fine face and a shadow that seemed fixed beyond any erasure hovered across his strong eyes. His chin came up, but he said nothing at the moment; only watched Benton with a manner that was full of questioning. Rae McMurtree came between the two men.

"I told you," she said, "he'd come back." There was pride in the words.

"You saw Vilas?" asked Big Lafe, showing anxiety.

"Yes, but it will do you no good."

"He refused?"

Benton shook his head. "He's dead."

Big Lafe stood very still, accepting the news with a deeper show of strain.

"Your boys," went on Benton, "hit Blackrock like a ton of dynamite and wrecked the town. It's burning now. That ought to be some satisfaction to you, no matter what the consequences."

"We're lost," muttered Big Lafe. "Absolutely lost. The prairie will never let that go by. It'll wipe us out. My outfit killed Vilas?"

"No," said Benton, thinking it odd how his talk echoed and died in the barrenness of the room. The fire silhouetted the girl beside him. She was watching him closely. "No, no McMurtree got Vilas. His own man, Wolfert, shot and killed him from behind."

"Wolfert!"

"It should be clear enough to you now what part Wolfert plays in this mess. He's high man."

"Why," grunted Big Lafe, "he's killed the golden goose! He made a profit out of Pete Vilas every time I turned over a herd to him."

"He intends to make more profit with Vilas out of the way. Look here. At the time you met him last night in the meadow he had it all arranged. His own bunch of rawhiders were right behind him. Those were the gentlemen that opened up on you. It was his scheme. Don't you see it?"

"He wants a war?"

"He's made one," amended Benton, "and while the hill and the desert are tied up in a dog fight, he'll go out and rustle the range as he pleases. Who'll get the blame for the stock stealing? You will."

"And The'dore fell for it," growled Big Lafe. "I tried to hush the boys. They would have nothing to do with me. It was The'dore who cried trouble and took 'em down there tonight. Blast the man, I've got to put on my gun and settle this for a last time!"

"He fell for nothing," contradicted Benton.

He was silent for a moment, feeling the attention of the girl and Big Lafe riveted to him. But there was something more happening in the stillness of this moment. These people were leaning on him, they were unconsciously placing the little hope they had into his keeping; he was aware of it with a sort of strengthening fire of energy. It changed his outlook, stiffened him.

"I wouldn't say this," he went on, "except that I seem to be one of the parties of the first part now. The'dore's got his irons in the fire, too."

Big Lafe's reply was a halting inclination of his head. The girl, however, vented a quick exclamation: "I knew it!"

"When I left here," added Benton, "I walked right into Wolfert and The'dore holding a directors' meeting near the Benton place. They creased me. I overheard a lot of talk while they thought I was out. The'dore is using the McMurtree boys to keep the fight boiling. Wolfert suggested the raid on Blackrock. The'dore agreed. It's plain that The'dore's all the same as a Wolfert hand."

Instead of lifting Big Lafe to a rage, the news strangely depressed him. His tall frame lost its stiffness and his shoulders drooped forward.

"I wish," he said slowly, "I could make the boys see that. But it will never stick. Reno, I'm an old man. I'm finished."

"While we're on the subject," put in Benton, "my name is not Reno. I am Hi Benton's son. I went away from here sixteen years ago as a little heart-broken kid. But I never forgot the tragedy that did away with my dad and aged my mother. I'm back now to find out who killed the old man."

Big Lafe's body straightened. A great fire of surging emotions poured from the drill-straight eyes, at once relentless and probing. After a long interval he said coldly, "I ought to order you away. Hi Benton was no friend of mine."

"Since you were in the habit of raiding his range when you chose," Jim Benton answered sharply, "why should he have been your friend?"

Big Lafe nodded and held his tongue. It was the girl who answered.

"All that is over and we're sorry, though that is poor consolation now.

But—have you found out it was not a McMurtree that killed your father?"

"Yes."

"What in the devil's name," Big Lafe growled, showing something of his old domineering manner, "are you doing here? You've got no reason to put in your gun with us. It ain't reasonable. What's the answer?"

Benton was watching the girl, watching the light of the fire stream across her face and shift its expression. Her lips moved, her hand rose slowly along the rough woolen shirt she wore and paused at the exposed white throat; color stained her cheeks. Benton suddenly looked away, stirred by odd impulses. The girl said calmly:

"Never mind his reason, Dad. It may be a good one. I told you I trusted him. I do now—more than before."

Big Lafe's came out of his rigid posture, attention running across the room. "They're returning," he warned. "Benton, help yourself! I'm not able to help you!"

"Your horse!" exclaimed Rae, and then ran across the room and hurried into the yard.

Benton stepped slowly backward and paused against the kitchen door, hearing the cavalcade drum along the meadow. Voices, rough and impatient, struck through the walls of the house. Somebody shouted a name. Somebody else said: "There'll be a guard around this clearin' tonight."

Then the girl, gasping and with her eyes ablaze with excitement, came up behind Benton, through the kitchen. Boots tramped over the porch.

"I led your pony to the woodshed," whispered Rae McMurtree. "What else do you want me to do?"

"I'll take a hand," murmured Benton and backed into the kitchen. The

girl, touching him briefly on the shoulder, passed on, closing the door; but Benton, crouched against its kitchen side, opened it again half an inch or so and thus saw the McMurtree crew stamp in from the night, full of swag-ger and hard temper.

The'dore was foremost. His sinister face sought out Big Lafe and a queer, suppressed pleasure showed itself in the foreman's half smile. He stopped in front of the old man.

"I've done what should have been done years ago," he said insolently. "You only talked about doin' it. Lafe, make up your mind to it—I'm boss here now. I'll take charge of the McMurtree affairs. These lads want more than an old man's pipe-dreamin'. You're through."

Big Lafe answered with a voice that was choked and trembling. "The'dore, what have you done to my boys? Damn your black heart, what have you done to them? Where's the others? Where's the other twelve lads?"

Benton measured the McMurtree ranks with a close interest. He counted nineteen hands in that party, suddenly realizing that it had been badly handled in the fight. Only twenty-four hours previous the outfit had filled the hall; now it stood shrunken in the lamplight. Blackrock had taken toll.

"I have managed this family for twenty years!" went on Big Lafe, almost shouting. "For twenty years! And I never led it to slaughter!"

"You've got to fight fire with fire," grumbled The'dore, not quite so forth-right in his manner.

"You whelp!" shouted Big Lafe. "It's McMurtree blood you're spillin'—not yours!"

"Blackrock," defended The'dore, "is wiped off the earth."

"What of it? That won't help the lads lyin' dead and deserted down there!"

"Lafe," broke in another man sardonically, "you've lost your grip on yourself. If we'd hit back twenty years ago like we hit back tonight, maybe we'd be out there as kings of the country instead of spendin' all this time dodgin' through the trees. Well, we've made a start. Quit raggin' The'dore."

The'dore stared at Big Lafe with an ironic gleam. "There's your answer!" he grunted. "Now let's have no more squawkin'."

Benton heard Big Lafe's breath rush into the stillness of the room. Turning, Benton went across the kitchen on the balls of his feet and out the back way. Pausing a moment, he scouted the yard and saw none of the McMurtree hands moving around. All of them, evidently, were inside and taking part in the showdown. Thus reassured, Benton crawled along the house wall until he arrived at the front porch.

"Time to do something on my own account," Benton told himself quietly, and pushed the door open.

The'dore was talking and the unnecessary strength of his words cloaked the smaller sounds of Benton's entrance. He closed the door behind him and stepped sidewise, alertly watching the row of backs presented to him. Only Big Lafe and the girl commanded his entry, but Big Lafe seemed not to see him. It was the girl's eyes that lifted, touched him, and fell swiftly away.

The'dore said, "There'll be a guard posted tonight, Lafe. Make no mistake about it—the Blackrock bunch will pay us a visit. I've got it worked out. I'm going to lay two big brush piles to either side of the meadow and drench

'em with coal oil. When that gang does come stormin' along I'll have those brush piles lighted. They'll be caught between the firelights."

Benton lifted his gun. "Wait a minute," he said quietly.

He was afraid of that first moment of shock and astonishment—afraid that these men might react to the instant's warning and knock him out of his tracks. As it was, they came around all at once and he thought he had lost his battle then and there. Those lithe bodies wheeled and swayed and he saw arms drop lower and lower. Tense antagonism clamped the dark-tanned features into a common expression that made each McMurtree look increasingly like the others. One man—he was only a boy—seized the butt of his revolver and half lifted it. The'dore, sheltered where he stood, called out angrily:

"Get him—go on, get him!"

His words were overridden by Big Lafe's stentorian contradiction: "Leave him alone! The man has done me a favor!"

Benton rode out the crisis with a smooth, cool drawl. "If I wasn't a friend of you boys, I wouldn't be here. Why should I ride into certain grief?"

"Then what's that gun lifted for?" yelled The'dore.

"I wasn't so sure of my reception," murmured Benton.

"Get him!" cried The'dore, so roused that his talk was thick and clumsy. "He's the man that framed that trap—and then ducked out of it!"

"Wrong, The'dore," argued Benton with the same relentless calm. "I staged nothing. And I didn't duck out. You lads rushed away from me. I've had a tough time finding my way back."

"Where've you been since dark last night?" challenged The'dore.

"Where would you suppose?" Benton parried.

He looked straight into The'dore's thin, slashed face and he saw the sullen eyes widen and contract. At that Benton knew he had breasted the first dangerous wave of antagonism. As for the rest of the McMurtree hands, Big Lafe's long-maintained discipline seemed still to have its effect. They held fast.

"Leave him alone," repeated Big Lafe. "He has done us a favor."

"What favor?" grunted The'dore.

"Let him tell it," said Big Lafe and waved an arm gently at Benton.

It was a clear signal that he had done all he could and that from this point on Benton was the governor of his own fortune. Seeing it thus, Benton ventured a shift of position. He moved quietly around the group and toward the fire, keeping his back to the wall. When he stopped he was within fifteen feet of The'dore, commanding the foreman; more than that, he had flanked the other hands. If they opened on him now it meant a shifting and an interval of confusion. The'dore got the meaning of that immediately.

"You dumb mugs—"

"The'dore," broke in Benton, "why not leave well enough alone?"

He had the foreman guessing. The'dore's unlovely visage tightened still more and he shifted his weight without stepping out of his position. Still casual, Benton allowed the muzzle of his gun to drop. It hung limp in his fist while he tested his luck.

"I saw the bonfire on the prairie," he remarked. "Made a nice little blaze."

"Where were you?" rapped out The'dore.

"On top of the bench," said Benton readily.

"How—" began The'dore. Then he stopped and scowled. "You spent a lot of time foolin' around," he finished gruffly.

"And learned a lot of things, The'dore. When did you decide to hit Blackrock?"

For a considerable length of time The'dore delayed the answer, apparently reasoning out the question, weighing it.

"What difference," he finally said, "would it make to you?"

"It was a day premature, wasn't it, The'dore? Got impatient, didn't you?"

The'dore's muscles went tight. He swung into a visible crouch. But he disregarded the question. It was one of the McMurtree hands who spoke up, puzzled.

"How's that?"

"Attack was to've been tomorrow night," explained Benton negligently.

"Who told you?" pressed the hand.

Benton ventured a brief side glance at them and saw he had the complete attention of the crew. He drew a deep breath, pinning his eyes to The'dore.

"You've been badly fooled, boys. I don't blame you for wiping Blackrock off the map. But it ain't your idea, like you think. A cleverer head figured it out—a fellow that wanted a roaring good war started for his own profit. While the prairie is chasing you fellows all over hell's half acre, he'll be out stripping the range—and you will get the blame."

The'dore relaxed. The'dore permitted himself a flicker of a smile that was wry and dangerous.

"Seem to have the confidence of this fellow, Reno."

"It was sort of forced on me."

"Here," said the McMurtree hand; "let's get somewheres. Who's the man?"

"Hale Wolfert."

"And how," shot out the hand, "would you be wise to this?"

"When the fight began over the cattle," explained Benton, "I drew out of it. Wasn't my fight. Next day I started down the slope and ran into a pair of gentlemen seriously talkin' shop. I was laid cold. But I heard these two talk plenty. They arranged the attack for tomorrow night. One of those fellows was Wolfert—and he took me to his camp. I finally broke away and got back here to meet the other man. That crook right there—The'dore."

The'dore's grin of cold fury grew. "I thought you'd mess up some such story," he sneered.

Benton pressed on, driving his point home. "That cattle fight was staged. Wolfert meant it as a starter."

"Yeah?" growled The'dore. "You—"

"The'dore was in on that also," snapped Benton. "For proof of it, where was The'dore when the shooting began? On the dead lope, away from the meadows. That first bust of lead found him away to the other side of the battle. You bet he knew. He never showed up till daylight the next morning."

"Who are you?" asked the McMurtree hand, with a clear show of thoughtfulness.

"Jim Benton, son of old Hi."

"Oh," muttered the hand. "I begin—"

"Sure. My own iron's in the fire. But I've found the man that killed my old man. It's no McMurtree and so I've got no grudge against you. But you're playing the part of suckers. You went down to Blackrock and you lost a lot of men. Where was The'dore during *that*

scrap? I didn't see him in the lead—and I was in an alley watching pretty close. Suckers—it's the plain fact."

That stung them, and Benton saw that he had made a mistake. He had been too harsh. The McMurtree hand turned slowly to The'dore.

"Guess it's up to you to answer this dude, The'dore."

"I can do it," rasped The'dore. "Benton, just drop that gun."

"I'd as soon see you draw," said Benton evenly.

The'dore's eyebrows came farther down. He half drew a breath, seemed to hold it. Then he called sharply to the crew.

"Spread across the room. If he lifts that gun—"

Benton, not daring to let The'dore get beyond the focus of his vision, heard the crew hreak reluctantly from the compact huddle and obey the order. The'dore had won.

"Now," repeated The'dore, "just drop the gun and walk out of the door."

Something happened then that Benton didn't quite grasp at first. The girl had apparently left the room a little before. She came running from the kitchen now and her command was like a dash of cold water.

"No! Get out of here—all of you! March, you fools! The'dore, do you want a load of buckshot?"

It broke the tension and turned all of them in her direction. She stood beside the fireplace, a double-barreled shotgun lifted on her own people. The'dore swayed forward, but Big Lafe's arm pushed him roughly back. Then somebody cursed violently and wheeled around. In another moment they were filing out to the porch. Stepping backward to the wall, Benton trained his gun on The'dore.

"You, too," he said softly.

The'dore flung up his head. "You'll never leave this house," he muttered. "Rae, I'll have something to say to you later—when this is ironed out."

The'dore went over the boards, heels dragging, and left the place. Benton, waiting for that, kicked the door shut, shot the bolt, and sprang aside.

"Blow the light," he called. "Get away from the fireplace." Outside he could hear The'dore's harsh voice denouncing him, goading the men, urging them to attacking positions.

It was the girl who whipped out the lamp's glow. Big Lafe stood motionless, muttering:

"We're no better off. We're worse off. Should have taken their guns."

"We didn't have enough bulge on 'em to work it," said Benton. "It's one thing at a time. This was the best we could do—this time."

Part of the crew ran the length of the porch, heels making a clatter.

The girl said sharply, "Dad, get away from that fire!"

"Hide in my own house?" thundered Big Lafe. "Never! I—"

The rest of his speech was overwhelmed by the roar of a gun. Glass clattered to the floor. A high yelling began to rise from outside. Big Lafe slowly turned, put a hand to his chest, and bowed his head, the firelight showing the grim despair riding his fine old face. Then he went down as if fighting the collapse with every stubborn fiber in him—went down on his side and lay there.

The girl screamed, "Dad!"

"It's worse for you two," mumbled old Lafe. "For me it's better. The rewards of a crooked life. I'm glad to go thisaway. There, honey, stop the crying. Benton, you'll have—to get her


away from here. You can't hold out in here. Never can. Get her away. Only one man could've—done this. The'dore. But he did me a favor, anyhow. Stop crying—"

Posted in the darkest part of the room, Benton saw the old man die. Rae McMurtree crouched over him, sobbing with a stifled agony that cut into Benton like a knife. Beyond the bouse wall men were running again and a call went from place to place. Then a voice penetrated the boards.

"Get upstairs, Rae. We're goin' to blast Benton to hell an' gone!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Into the Shadows



THE fire on the hearth was dying, turning to a dull blood glow; Rae McMurtree still crouched on her knees before Big Lafe, but she had stopped crying and he saw her shoulders rigidly framed against the dwindling light, her head raised and her eyes fixed on some point above the mantel. Looking up there, Benton saw the framed picture of a woman, a wistful middle-aged woman who seemed to survey the room with a profound sadness and wisdom. Benton guessed it to be the girl's mother.

The voice called again, more peremptorily: "Rae, get upstairs! Get out of the room and stay away from Benton!"

"Come away," said Benton gently.

The girl got to her feet and came over to him very slowly. He was surprised to find how contained her face was, as if she had exerted her will to put the tragedy behind her. It struck him that suddenly she looked a great

deal like that older woman whose picture was on the mantel piece—sad, yet resolute and unafraid. Benton expressed the only reassurance he could find.

"He was a tired man, your dad. Mighty tired. And he said he was glad to go this way. I'd take his word for that, Rae."

"I believe it," whispered the girl. Then she raised her dark glance to him. "The McMurtree women have always gone through this, Jim. Always have cried over men who died in violence. Disappointment and heartbreak and a life of uncertainty in one wild land or another. Before my mother died she told me to expect it—to learn to smile when there was nothing to smile for. There is a strain of lawlessness in the McMurtree blood that nothing will cure. Nothing but a bullet. All this—I knew it would come some day. But I never thought a McMurtree would ever die at the hands of his own kind. Jim, I've been a good soldier till now, never saying much because I understood how much my father wanted peace to come. But I can feel sorry no longer for what happens to the boys. I'm all through with that."

"Any brothers of yours out there?"

"No. The closest kin I have in that yard is a second cousin. The rest are even less related. The'dore—he is no relation at all."

"I wanted to know," said Benton gravely. "I've got to fight back. It'll be your own people I'm throwing lead at."

"Go ahead!" said the girl with a quick surge of energy. "There is nothing more I can do. They are out to destroy and be destroyed!"

"It's me or them," Benton added, wanting to make the point very clear.

She lifted her eyes so that he could

see them. "You ought to know by now how I feel about that, Jim."

The brusque voice came again: "We're opening up at the count of ten. Are you in the clear, Rae?"

"Go upstairs," whispered Benton, "I'll follow in a minute."

"Be careful," said Rae McMurtree, and held her position. But Benton turned her about with his hands and pushed her away. Waiting there in the blackest corner of the hall, he saw her climb the stairs and pause at the head of them. At that, Benton moved. He cat-footed along the wall, came beside a window and crouched.

Somebody outside said, "All set?" A man farther off repeated it. A moment later a body leaped to the porch and raced across it. The man at the window flung his cry high into the night.

"All right!"

It was the signal for a rising roar of guns, a rending sound of wood and the tinkling of shattered glass all around the room. Lead ripped the floor at Benton's feet. Lead whined and flattened against the stones of the fireplace, and the embers of the fire leaped up as one bullet and another tore into it. Benton stiffened, catching the silhouette of a McMurtree hand wavering outside the window. He lifted his revolver, waited with patience till he saw his target fair and sure, and then he fired. That man went down, without uttering a word. But beyond, a thick, savage shout broke through the detonations.

"Go after him—go after him! Smash that door down before he kills anybody else! What's the matter with you yellow mugs?"

That was The'dore, speaking from shelter. Benton wheeled and ducked away from his location. He had been spotted by some hand shooting

through another window and the slugs of that marksman rapped the flooring right at his heels. Once more flattened against the wall, Benton studied the windows until he caught the muzzle flash coming through one near the front door. He fired only once, pivoted again, and raced up the stairs to the gallery. They were sledging in the door with a heavy piece of timber.

"Jim," whispered the girl. "We'd better try to get away. The storeroom roof leads off from my bedroom window."

"No horses—no chance."

"Your horse is in the shed beyond the storeroom."

The end of the timber crashed through the panels of the door and jammed there. Benton took a hand rest on the gallery railing and put the last three shells of his load into those panels with a cold fury. Savagely pleased, he heard them yelling on the porch. The end of the timber skewed upward as the outside part was dropped and deserted. A moment later a fresher and more intense volley tore through all the windows. The girl laid a hand on Benton's shoulder while he reloaded.

"We'd better try it," she urged. "There's no use trying to hold out here. They'll get in."

"They're in," grunted Benton and leaned far over the rail to command the kitchen doorway. Three men came through it at once, bodies dim in the darkness of the room. They literally hurled themselves through, jammed together and firing as they entered. Afterward they broke, each man advancing on a different tangent, sweeping the shadows for the target as yet undiscovered. Motionless for one brief second, Benton watched, at the same

time hearing the front door grind on its hinges again. One arm moved the girl backward, out of range, as the other brought up the gun with a dragging deliberation.

Benton said, "Up here, boys," and let go.

The foremost hand, almost at the foot of the stairway, emitted a great, gusty cry and snapped his weapon around. But Benton pinned him in his tracks, the roar of the concerted explosions washing like waves of water around him. He caught the second man at the middle of the room—saw him spin and fall—and with that maddened coolness still touching every nerve and fiber, he tried for the third hand ducking back beneath the gallery by the fireplace. This marksman shot away a section of stairway banister, knocking up a loosely nailed board of the gallery itself not a foot from where Benton stood. And then, cursing at each hammer fall, he hooked himself around the kitchen doorway's edge and got beyond range.

"The front!" cried the girl. "Watch out!"

But Benton had seen the door go down from the corner of his vision and now, free to divert his attention, he did all that he could do. There were again three cartridges left and a doorway full of charging McMurtrees. Into that boiling jam of bodies he placed the last of his shots, wheeled, and ran to a bedroom. The girl, preceding him, closed the door quietly and stood speechless in the deeper dark, her breath rising and falling. The booming, excited cries of the ranch crew overflowed the main hall and beat against the bedroom wall.

"That window leads to the storeroom roof," said the girl.

Benton closed the revolver's cylinder on another load, remarking: "It's gone this far, so it might as well go a little farther."

The girl crossed the room, pulling aside the curtains. "The window is open. Your luck won't last forever."

"No," murmured Benton. "It never has."

"Then come on."

He was listening to the noise out there in the hall. It sounded like an ax knocking away on the stairs. Furniture tipped and was dragged across the floor. One man's voice seemed to be ordering all this in rapid, nervous phrases.

"It's better for you to be left behind," urged Benton, "than to be struck by a bullet meant for me. Crossing the roof is dangerous business, Rae."

She was not beside him. Turning, he saw her slip through the window. A soft whisper came back:

"Whether you want it or not, you've got me on your shoulders. Come on."

He followed, dropping down two feet to the peak of the storeroom roof and flattening himself beside the girl, who was lying on the shingles. A solitary figure ran clumsily out of the barn, passed beneath them and around to the front of the house. Elsewhere, Benton could make out no McMurtree standing guard. He let go of the roof's ridge and worked down to the eaves, and a moment later dropped to the ground. Reaching up, he seized the girl as she came to the eaves and steadied her. She was whispering again.

"Follow me and I'll run for the shed where the horse is. It's only—"

"Hold fast!" warned Benton.

A gun spoke flatly across the front

yard. A man began crying for the McMurtrees at the top of his voice. The smashing echoes in the house stopped abruptly and Benton made out the pounding of feet across the living-room floor. Hard on that, the surrounding blackness was pierced by the stinging whine of rifle bullets and off at the lower edge of the long meadow sounded flat reports strung together, like the explosion of firecrackers.

"Try it!" snapped Benton. "Got to get out of here now! That's the Black-rock party come to pay back the raid!"

He lost the girl in that space of time it took him to turn around. But he heard her running out into the shadows and he followed more or less blindly till the bulk of a small building came against him. She was there waiting, and catching his arm, she led him around to a doorway and through it. His horse moved up, swung against him.

"Out of this door and straight forward," said Rae swiftly. "The trees are only about two hundred feet off."

"Down—flat down!" grunted Benton, and he fell, pulling her with him.

There was trouble nearer at hand. The rifles were rolling out a louder fury along the meadow and from that immediate area beyond the shed—where the girl had indicated their safety to lie—a great clatter and smashing of brush announced a flanking attack. He heard men break clear and come on afoot, calling in undertones to each other, and presently he made out the shifting line of about six men breasting the dark. Benton crawled to the door and laid his gun across it.

"Roll aside and keep your head low," he muttered to Rae.

He thought the attacking hands meant to collect by the shed. They

raced on with every indication of doing it, which meant disaster for him and for the girl. Benton lifted his gun to throw them back.

But before his hammer fell a new movement started. The main body out in front of the house seemed to be halted by the resistance of the McMurtrees in the house. A heavy call penetrated the shadows, a call of warning and direction, and in response the half-dozen men swinging up to the shed veered sharply and went by it, aiming for the barn.

Benton thought that the foreground was clear and had started to rise when a pair of men came dimly into view, crossing the ground at a slower pace. They disregarded the general fight. In fact they appeared to be avoiding it, for Benton had barely time enough to roll aside from the shed's doorway when these two reached it and stopped.

"Damn-fool stunt—to hit the front of the house," said one.

"Wolfert's full of fool stunts," grunted the other.

"You in any hurry to run against that shootin'?"

"Do I look like it?"

"We-ell, this is a good place to be."

"Yeah, if Wolfert don't catch us."

"He's plumb busy over yonder."

"Don't lay no bets on it. He's an Indian for findin' out things."

"Say, there's a pony in this shed."

They stopped talking. Benton shifted his gun and held his breath. Such faint light as came through the door opening was blocked out as one of the two men tentatively stepped in and halted. A long, straining moment of suspense ensued. The pony blubbered a little and shifted forward; one of his feet grazed Benton and that seemed to frighten him, for he fiddled backward with an

excited blast through his nostrils. The man remaining outside issued a low warning.

"I wouldn't be foolin' around, Jeff."

"Somebody," said the fellow inside the shed, "put this critter here for a quick run." He took another step forward, changed his mind, and wheeled about. Benton saw him cross the dim shield of the doorway and move beyond it.

"Maybe this ain't no place for us," said the first voice. "Too many stray slugs."

"All right. We'll amble toward the barn."

They went away at a trot and their steps finally faded into the general uproar of the fight in the meadow. This had reached pitched proportions. All the guns were ripping the darkness into shreds. A man in the meadow was yelling with a crazy ferocity, but nothing he said made sense. Yet it served a purpose; it never varied, never moved nearer or went farther away, and from it Benton judged the attackers were no closer to the house than they had been. The McMurtree fire held them.

"Appears to be a break here for us," whispered Benton. "We'll try it."

She was up and beside him instantly. "Ride out on the dead run, Jim?"

"No, that won't do. You get on your hands and knees and crawl across to the tree line. I'll wait about half a minute and then follow with the pony."

He saw her drop and move away, and then he lost her. Time lagged intolerably and he caught himself methodically counting. There was a distinct break in the fight that worried him—a shifting of forces. Some of Wolfert's men were coming along the side of the meadow apparently with the idea of

hitting the house on an angle. The McMurtrees caught that maneuver instantly and began to fire through the side windows. The gun reports shifted, lashing out more distinctly, and Benton heard the whipping of the spent lead along the ground and in the brush. Meanwhile his mechanical counting reached thirty and stopped. Seizing the pony's cheek strap, he led it through the doorway, paused for a final check, and struck straight across the cleared area.

Suddenly two great bombs of fire shot into the sky from the meadow. The McMurtrees had managed to build their brush piles in that brief period between the death of Big Lafe and Wolfert's attack, and now they had been ignited. The furious spires of light at once caught part of Wolfert's men in a deadly silhouette. But the light did more than that. It reached around the side of the house, dispelled even the farther shadows, and revealed Benton halfway between the shed and the brush.

Someone cried out, "Catch that man!"

A bullet flicked the dirt at his feet and he saw two men race for him in tandem order. There was only one answer. He went up the wrong side of the horse to the saddle and dug in his spurs. Bent far down, he crossed the rest of the open stretch in great lunges and drove heedlessly into the marginal brush. A volley of shots followed him. The horse abruptly winced, staggered, and as Benton threw himself clear, fell headlong.

Benton sprang aside from the bullet-swept space, shouting, "Rae—Rae!"

Then he brought up short, feeling the girl's arm reach out and touch him. For answer he picked her up bodily

and ran on into the depths of the timber, a good fifty feet on, down the lip of a gully and into the mushy underfooting of a forest creek. Safe here, he stopped and let the girl stand.

"We've lost a horse," he muttered.

"There's a bunch of ponies back by the edge of the yard," said Rae, "left there by those men that came toward the shed."

"Walt here," said Benton and climbed from the gully. The fires in the meadow were burning brightly and he saw the horses bracketed against this light only a little to the left of him. Closing in, he got out his pocket knife, cut the cinches of all but two, and led these back. He missed the girl again and had to send out a short halloo. When he found her she said:

"This is a warning for us, Jim. We must not get separated in these hills."

"What I want to do," reflected Benton, "is get back to the high country where we were riding the other day. You know the trails. Lead out."

"Jim," challenged the girl, a definite ring in her words, "I want to know. Are we staying in the hills or are we leaving them?"

"We'll never go—not until we're driven out foot by foot."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Burned Bridges



HE had no more to say and he wondered what had prompted the question. But it was a tricky trail she followed and he lost her twice before they made the long curve

about the McMurtree meadow and paused on the edge of a southern can-

yon. She stopped and turned the horse about, lifting an arm to what was going on over by the ranch.

"Jim—I'll never go back there. Never! The ground is saturated with blood. I have nothing left—not one single kinsman worth saving or remembering. It's the end of the McMurtree ranch."

He had no reply. There was none to make. Those great glares were like funeral pyres. The house loomed up like a fortress and the lesser buildings to the rear were squat and dull crimson. Men were rushing out of one covert into another and long lances of orange-purple creased the shadows about the barn. In that brief and final inspection he saw one irregular wave of Wolfert men pour from the barn and stumble forward, converging on the back quarter of the main house. Some of them dropped; the rest went on and vanished from view.

The yelling had increased, pitching across the meadow with a strangled, muted effect. On the porch he saw the climax of one bitter contest; a Wolfert hand leaped from the darker side of the house to the porch and raced across it just as some McMurtree hand opened the door and came out. There was no parrying. Those two plunged together in a snarling, wrenching body-to-body conflict, and the McMurtree man at last caught his opponent under the arms and forced him back into the house. Somebody raced for the trees, never looking behind him. A Wolfert partisan sped out of the barn with a lighted torch in his fist, got against the house wall without injury, and dropped the torch against the wood. After that he scuttled the length of the wall and passed to the rear. Rae McMurtree drew a quick, hurt breath.

"Let's get out of here! I don't want to see any more!"

"Lead for the high point yonder," said Benton gently, and kept his mouth closed during the next long hour.

They dipped into the canyon and out of it. They rose to the summits and passed beneath the rolling banks of fog. The far-off firing dimmed and died. But once, turning to scan the blankness of sky and earth, he saw a widening arc of crimson stain the distant obscurity. The ranch was burning. That grim old fortress of the hills was being consumed as Blackrock had been consumed.

They were scraping the ceiling of the world, and eastward the opaque quality of the night began to break. Another day stood on the threshold. Seeing that, Benton called a halt.

They were in a small, pine-surrounded glade that literally dripped with the condensing mists. Unsaddling the two horses, Benton made a bed of the blankets and his slicker.

"Roll up, Rae," he said. "We'll get what breathing spell we can."

She dropped without protest, exhausted. For himself, he crimped a cigarette and cupped a match in the crown of his hat. Crouched Indian-fashion beside the girl, he watched the broad bands of light wedge the horizon—glad to have this long night go, even though he found no promise in the hours coming. The worst of the fight was still ahead—of that he was absolutely sure. Such exits as there were from the hills would soon be guarded. Wolfert would never let them go without contest. Tipping his head, he saw that Rae was not sleeping. Very quiet in the blankets, she watched him through the twilight and fog mists.

"Jim," she asked abruptly, "what

crime could possibly be against you? Why should you, of all men, be running from a posse? I don't understand. You're not that sort of a man. You never could be."

He sat silent awhile, puzzling over his answer. He realized now that he had not told her because he had dared to wonder if it would make a difference to her. The girl turned away, mistaking his silence, and said rather quickly:

"I don't want to pry into your affairs. Never mind."

"A day might come," he mused, "when my affairs might be your affairs. Is that possible, Rae?"

"Maybe," she answered, just above a murmur. "Maybe, Jim."

"As to this posse business—"

"I told you I didn't want to pry."

"Tomorrow," he said simply, "may never come. And I wouldn't want you to remember me as a fellow better than I was—or worse."

"Don't you suppose I have eyes to see, Jim? I have watched hard men, mean men. You're not that sort. You carry yourself straight. You speak as if there wasn't anybody in the land you were afraid of. You looked directly at my father."

"Thanks, Rae."

"As for the posse—" Her voice quieted, turned wistful. "As for the posse—I guess we all make honest mistakes. I'm not holding it against you. I wish your back trail was clear. But if it isn't, I don't care. I don't care, Jim."

"I'll say this much," put in Benton swiftly, "it was nothing much—and may turn out to be less. We'll let it ride like that till the shootin's over."

After a pause, she asked, "What did you want to do?"

"Well—if I were alone I'd never

move an inch, Rae."

"Then," said the girl, "that is what we'll do."

"You don't get it," he explained. "I mean I'd make my stand on the bench and wait out what's coming."

"I understood it the first time you said it."

"I came back to settle a score. I'm not entirely sure it is settled. When Wolfert dies I'll know it is settled. But that's only half the story. I was born in these hills, Rae. This is my old home. I came back to see what it looked like. I don't want to go away now. This country was meant for me. That ranch down on the bench—I want it."

"I don't see how you'll ever get it, or hold it," the girl reflected.

"Remains to be seen," said Benton, casually grim.

Rae McMurtree's two hands came together tightly. "Jim, Wolfert will fight. I'd hate to see you—"

"What?"

She shook her head and looked away, lips pressed white. Benton rose and kicked the cramp from his legs. The mists were sinking into the roundabout canyons and this high peak stood momentarily isolated from the world. The sky was still full of stars, but the grayness of early morning filled it, lightened it and slowly shifted to a paling blue. Eastward a rose light began to lift. False rain dropped from tree and bush. The two horses were a hundred feet off, cropping the lush grass. The smell of smoke drifted on the slight wind—the smoke of the McMurtree ranch buildings. The girl called Benton back.

"We might as well have it out," she said.

Benton turned, finding a brighter

glow in the girl's eyes. The color of inner emotion shaded her white, even features.

"Tell me what—what I know you want to tell me," she demanded.

"This is no time for it," he countered.

"When will be a better time?" she challenged him. "If it won't survive bad luck it won't survive good. Are you afraid of that, Jim?"

"All right," he answered, at once rough and direct. "I want you for my wife, Rae."

She stood up from the blankets. "You can have me."

"We're not out of trouble yet. We're in deep."

"All the more reason why we should settle this. I want you to know, whatever happens."

"You've lived among outlaws all your life," said Benton, coming toward her. "You've had no security and no peace. Now you've got me on your hands, knowing I'm hunted. Rae, it may be a bad bargain."

"I know," said the girl. She reached out and took one of his hands. "But I can't run away from myself. If this is the way it is to be for me, then there's nothing more to be said."

Benton gripped her fingers and then stepped suddenly back.

"There's a lot more to be said, but we'll not say it now. I'm going to that pinnacle to have a look. Better lie down and rest while we've got the chance."

Twenty yards away, he heard her say something indistinct. When he looked around she was smiling. One small hand rose swiftly to her mouth and went out to him.

"Gamblers sometimes win, Jim!" she called. "But if they lose, they've had the gamble anyhow. Run along."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Renegade Justice

ARTHER away, the curve of the hillside cut her from sight, leaving him with a strange reluctance and strange misgivings. So pronounced was the feeling that he paused and stood with his attention weighing the minor sounds arising out of the morning's primeval calm. Reassured, he went on, found a more or less clear grade, and mounted the rough pinnacle.

At its tip the panoramic view of the hills unrolled to all sides. By now the mists had condensed in the lower canyons and coursed along them like foaming tides of water. Each jagged and rounded surface of the country lay exposed, running northward to a still greater tangle of ravine and ridge and sloping out southward to the prairie. That way Benton made a long survey, seeking the outline of Blackrock and finding only a dim char mark on the earth. Of the McMurtree ranch he could locate no fragment, but he did see a column of smoke bellying up from behind a flat-topped butte. The passions of men these last few hours had consumed much. He realized how hopeless it was now to expect a lessening of the chase or a softening of the unleashed antagonisms. There was more to be consumed. Fire never died till it had eaten away the substance of its own heart.

It was Benton's habit to analyze his fortunes pessimistically during idle spells. Now he considered the account to date and found it dismal enough. From first entry into the country he

had been pretty much thrown about. At no time had there been a break or a breathing spell in which he might choose his own plan. Events had rushed him along until now he faced a three-way attack.

The McMurtrees were against him. Wolfert and Wolfert's band would hunt for him. And lastly there was that new force in the battle to account for—the prairie men. They would assemble on the ruins of Blackrock and march forward.

"Each bunch set against the other," Benton told himself, "and all of 'em set against me. I don't know which way to look first. Wolfert may still be engaged with the McMurtrees. Or one or the other party may have run off. The one mighty certain fact is that the prairie bunch will be coming this way. They'll tangle with the McMurtrees without comment. Probably they'll do the same with the Wolfert outfit if they catch up. Wolfert himself might talk his way into the prairie delegation, but he could never convince the prairie boys that his bunch of rustlers were on the right side. So it stands—all messed up. Only other clear item is that Wolfert will try to write me off before I get a chance to betray him to anybody else."

He whipped his head to the westward and held it rigid, eyes focusing on a clearing on the side of a ridge about two miles distant. A small file of men charged across that space and disappeared into the smother of timber again. Benton's glance ran along the edges of that particular tree mass, locating the adjoining clearings; and for a long time he waited, expecting the party to come again into view. When it did, however, it was only briefly and vaguely, in the bottom of the canyon.

The course taken seemed to indicate an intention of reaching the summit country that he was in.

Not very many there, he thought. Part of Wolfert's band split off, maybe. Detachment of the prairie people? No, they'd hang together for the big smash. Or else it is what's left of the McMurtree boys. Likely. The sad survivors of a proud outfit.

It was time to move. His trail was still fresh in the yielding turf of the hills and they might cut it and follow. Ten minutes more of sweeping scrutiny produced no results and a last look to the prairie netted nothing. Impelled then by the sense of time wasted, he left the pinnacle and quartered to its foot.

"If I drift backward," he said to himself, "I gain nothing and lose ground. If I sidestep I keep in touch—" That was as far as his thinking went.

Through the trees and along the bending trail Rae McMurtree's cry, half scream and half call of warning, came shrill and shocking, and ended on a high note. The effect of it was literally to throw Benton back on his heels, and he hung in that odd balance till the cry, seeming to be released by terrific force, struck the shaky silence again.

Benton plunged forward with his head lowered, boots battering the soft earth. His hand lowered once and rose automatically, and thus he rounded the bend and raced over the little glade with gun lifted and searching. He had drawn the hammer half back before he saw that he could not shoot.

The girl, struck to her knees, rose with both hands reached forward. The'dore—the slash-cheeked, sullen-visaged The'dore—stepped away from her and cursed morosely; then Rae's

arms went around him with a frenzied strength and for a moment checked his draw. She was aware of Benton's return. The'dore, spilling over with rage, had not yet discovered the fact; all his thoughts were on the girl. He lifted her with a heave of his shoulders, got one arm free, and struck her across the face with a force that knocked her down again.

It was then that his shifting glance found Benton. Instantly The'dore's body stiffened. A wild and vicious and hunted expression flashed across the sulky cheeks and thereafter settled to a fixed mask of incredible hatred.

"Rae," cried Benton, fury throbbing in the words, "step aside from him!"

The'dore took a step toward the rising girl, clearly meaning to use her for a shield. But he was checked by Benton's veering gun muzzle and the dead, flat-toned command, "Stick to your tracks!"

The girl turned to Benton and started to speak, but she saw his gaze riveted to The'dore and apparently understood the danger of diverting it. White and trembling, she moved back out of range.

"The'dore," droned Benton, "you've prowled too long."

"You've got the drop on me," muttered The'dore between his teeth. "I can't draw."

"You want to draw?"

"Give me an even chance at it!"

"Why should I?" snapped Benton. "You've got no break comin' to you."

The'dore's eyes squinted across the interval, red and crafty. His tone turned wheedling, persuasive.

"Look here. When you was down and out yesterday morning and Wolfert wanted to finish the job right there, I bucked at it. It's me you can

thank for bein' alive."

"You're a yellow hound, The'dore," stated Benton. "All that stopped you from putting the bullet in me was a streak of butter up your back a foot wide. You wanted to do it bad enough. Is that what you're on my trail for?"

"Me? Hell, I'm not on your trail. I'm on my way. I'm leavin' this country. I'm through."

"Why? Seemed to me you and Wolfert had it all agreed. What are you worryin' about now?"

"Wolfert—that dog!" he yelled.

"So you're not good friends now?" asked Benton ironically.

"I'll kill him!" breathed The'dore.

"For a fact? In other words, he cut your throat before you had a chance to cut his. I never knew a thief worth trusting. You're no exception."

"Call this off," pleaded The'dore. "Call it off and I'll be on my way. You got grief enough without scrappin' me. I'm all through, I tell you!"

Benton let the talk drop for a minute. The forest stillness flowed through the clearing. Westward a great glow of warm bright light rose, heralding the sun. A woodpecker attacked the surface of a dead tree above them and a long, staccato rapping broke the peace. The scent of pine and steaming earth was heavy in the air. The girl had her back to a sapling, her small shoulders sagging, but her eyes were pinned to Benton with an odd care. As for The'dore, the strain of waiting cut deeper lines across his lawless visage. He stirred uneasily.

"Reach across with your left hand, pick your gun with two fingers, and drop it to the ground," ordered Benton.

"You're not goin' to pull a Spanish

on me!" bawled The'dore.

"Do as I say," pressed Benton.

The'dore obeyed with a lagging reluctance. He plucked the gun from its holster and dropped it at his feet. Benton smiled grimly.

"You're full of tricks, my friend. But that's an old one. Now kick that piece over my way."

The'dore's lips curved to a cruel, vulpine crescent. He caught the gun on his boot toe and sent it spinning. Benton reached down, got it, and flung it into the far bushes. He straightened suddenly, catching a forward gesture on The'dore's part, and for another dully dragging interval he studied the McMurtree foreman keenly.

"Now get on your pony and fog out of here," he said at last. "I ought to use my quirt on your back. But there's some pleasures I guess I'll have to pass up."

The'dore sighed enormously. The strain went from his cheeks and he reached into his vest pocket with a careful deliberation, bringing out his tobacco. He rolled a cigarette, contempt gradually curling into his lip corners. Catching this shift of temper, Benton realized he had misjudged his man. The'dore mistook mildness for weakness.

"You'll never get in the clear," sneered The'dore. "I'm tellin' you. This minute the hills are bein' locked up. Damn you, Benton, I wish I was around to see your finish!"

He pulled a match from his pocket and lit it against his thumb nail. Benton, weary of the delay, holstered his gun.

"Get on your pony and go. If I ever see you floating around here again I won't bother about warning you."

He moved ahead a foot and turned

toward the girl.

"This seems the best way, even—"

That was his mistake and he realized it even as he tried to whip himself backward and get his gun in operation again. But he never quite made it. The'dore had been waiting for that off-guard moment. His long body, set for the chance, hurtled the distance, struck Benton viciously and knocked him back. The'dore's big arms locked about Benton's waist. He tripped Benton and fell with him and the sheer weight of his body knocked the wind completely out of Benton's chest.

Half paralyzed, Benton tried to roll clear and got a sledge-like smash on the temple. The'dore, cursing, drew up a knee, trying to grind it into Benton's stomach as he meanwhile reached for the protruding gun butt on Benton's hip. At that, Benton's breath came back to him at a rush. His arms were free. Lifting them, he caught The'dore about the neck and at the same time kicked the man's body upward with his feet. The'dore emitted a strangled yell and capsized on one shoulder, shaken clear of Benton. Benton rolled and got to his feet and stood there, breathing hard.

"All right, The'dore," he grunted, "I'll get my pleasure after all! Come on up!"

The'dore was at him with a swift-ness and a ferocity born of a gamble gone bad. He tried to grip Benton again, but Benton, sidestepping, caught the man with a driving right-hand blow that skewed The'dore's frame half around. Stunned and shaken, he made a fair target and Benton went for him with relentless fury, ripping the half-mad face with driving fists. The'dore tried to bring his own arms into play. He groped uncertainly, and tried

for his bear hug. Right then he was wide open and Benton put the full weight of his body into one mauling smash under the chin. The'dore went down, breath gasping out of his slack and bloody mouth, and rolled in agony from shoulder to shoulder. Rae McMurtree ran forward, her hands touching Benton's bruised cheeks.

"Jim—if I'd had a gun I would have killed him!"

"He's through," rasped Benton, reaching deeply for air.

Then a slow voice behind them said, "Be careful and don't try to draw."

Spinning in his tracks, Benton saw one of the younger McMurtree boys rise from the brush with a revolver in his fist. Seven others of the McMurtree clan advanced from the surrounding thicket and closed in.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Home Again



TAKEN aback, Benton stood fast. But the girl turned and put herself defensively in front of him.

"You fools have made mistakes enough!" she said angrily. "I won't stand for any more. Do you hear me? If you weren't blind you'd see the difference between Jim Benton and that—that killer over there on the ground!" She stamped her foot and the flushed color burned brighter on her cheeks. "The'dore led you around as if you were a bunch of infants. He made you jump through circles for him. You believed in him so much that you let my father die in his own house! Well, what have you got out of it? Nothing! The house is gone and most of you are

gone! Now The'dore's running away. Do you believe in him now?"

"Easy, easy," cautioned one of the McMurtrees. "Give us a little credit."

"What for?" demanded the girl scornfully.

"Yeah," muttered the man. "I know it don't sound so well."

"What do you want now?"

"The'dore," said the McMurtree hand bluntly. "We discovered the dope about him just a little while ago. We had a showdown. He got away from us."

The fellow holding the gun put it slowly back into its holster, explaining to Benton:

"Didn't know how you'd act when you saw us come, so we thought it best to get the drop on you. No hard feelin's."

"Lin," said the girl, "where are the rest of the boys?"

Lin was the spokesman, a tall and gangling hand with the pointed and darkish McMurtree features prominent.

"This is about the size of it, Rae," he answered slowly. "We're all shot to pieces."

"You can thank The'dore for that!" cried the girl bitterly.

"The'dore," replied Lin noncommittally, "will get his pay, without thanks." He walked over to the fallen ex-foreman and looked down with an expression suddenly bleak beyond measure. He prodded The'dore with his boot and stepped back, waiting. But The'dore was still senseless, and after a moment Lin silently motioned another hand to keep watch. Swinging on Benton, he began to speak with a heavy regret.

"You've been on the right side all along. We've been on the wrong. We're glad you got shut of us without hurt

and we're sorry the fightin' happened. You're a damned good hand, mister. I wish—" But Lin McMurtree stopped the wish short and looked about with a sort of wistful hopelessness. "No use cryin'. The damage is done and we're through. We sure have sung our little song. Nothing to do now but pay the fiddler."

"Where's Wolfert and his bunch?" asked Benton.

"We beat those boys off," grunted Lin with a show of satisfaction. "Just before daylight they got a bellyful of it and backed away."

"Then," said Benton, "why don't you stick it out?"

But Lin kept shaking his head. "It won't do. There's another crowd comin' up the Blackrock-Morgantown road. We sighted it just before we left the ranch. Half the prairie in that troop. You know what those fellows aim to do, don't you? Sure. Wipe out the McMurtrees for once and for good. They'd do it, too, and never let us shout for mercy. I said we had to pay the fiddler, didn't I? We're through. Only thing now is to get out of the country and disappear complete. There ain't any more McMurtree outfit." He looked at the girl, gently adding, "We buried your dad in the grave lot, Rae. It was The'dore that shot him."

The girl nodded and turned away from them, walking back toward the edge of the clearing.

"Well, this is wasting time," Lin said. "Bring up The'dore's horse and tie him to the saddle. He's goin' with us."

Benton looked at this lank McMurtree and saw The'dore's fate in the man's darkling glance. The'dore was through. Then, as if answering the unspoken question, Lin said:

"He'll get his chance—but he won't survive it."

Silence fell, full of discouragement and brooding melancholy. They had brought up The'dore's horse and were tying his feet under the animal's belly and his hands to the horn. One of the group mounted and steadied him; The'dore was waking with a painful reflex of his muscles. The scarred face turned from side to side, only half recognizing the situation. He said, thickly:

"Get Benton—that's the main thing." Then his mind cleared and he looked down at his roped wrists. "You ain't got me yet!" he bawled.

Nobody answered him. His eyes went to Lin McMurtree, full of fear, but McMurtree stared back expressionlessly.

"You think Wolfert's men held together?" asked Benton.

"Maybe, maybe not," judged Lin. "They took a lot of punishment. Ain't so many left as you'd think. I'd hate to go through a fight like that again. It was hell—just plain hell. If those crooks stick by Wolfert now, they're bigger gluttons for punishment than I take 'em to be." He bowed his head, quite thoughtful. "You want my straight opinion of it? Well, this country has had a housecleanin'. In a damned odd fashion. Two crooked sides killed each other off. Ain't that somethin' to laugh over?"

"Boys," said The'dore, pleading his case, "if you'll let me go and give me a gun, I'll swear I'll never stop ridin' till I knock Wolfert out of the saddle. So help me!"

He was entirely ignored. Lin looked at the girl, called to her.

"Rae, we've got some extra horses. Come along. We're wastin' time here."

She wheeled. "I'm not going with

you, Lin."

"What?" grumbled Lin. "Lord, you don't think we'd leave you—"

"I'm not going," she said firmly.

"Well, how're you going to take care of yourself when—" Lin began. But another thought came to him and he pulled his head about and stared at Benton sharply. "So that's it, huh?"

"Yes," said the girl. "That's it."

"What do *you* aim to do?" Lin asked Benton bluntly.

"Stick. This is my country."

"Don't be too proud of your chances, mister. This scrape ain't over. Wolfert's around. And them prairie lads won't consider you very kindly."

Another of the outfit called out, "Harry's comin'."

A slim, small youth spurred up the slope and through the brush. He was hatless and excited.

"That Blackrock bunch reached the ranch," he said rapidly, "circled it once and lit out thisaway."

"We've got to tail out of here," decided Lin. "Rae, it's up to you."

"No."

The McMurtrees mounted. Lin looked down at Benton, his face sharpened by that clinging and insistent regret. "I wish you luck. I wish we'd known you a long time ago. One thing I'm damned sure about—you'll do better for Rae than any of her own kin did."

"So long," said Benton.

They moved compactly across the clearing, these ten McMurtrees, with the bound The'dore in the center of the group. Another moment and they were around the trail's bend. Benton heard The'dore lift his voice in a choked, wild-toned cursing, and this continued until the distance absorbed voice and hoofbeat alike. He looked at Rae.

"We're making a stand," he told her, "but I don't want to make it here."

"You're thinking about the ranch down on the bench," she said.

"That's it."

They went to the horses and stepped up. The girl was watching him curiously. "You realize, Jim, that the sheriff will be with those Blackrock men?"

"I know," he said, smiling grimly. "But we can't dodge it forever, Rae. It's only—"

She put out her arm and stopped him. "Jim, I'd rather run than lose you!"

He shook his head. "That ain't the right answer. Let's go."

She raised her shoulders with a queer gesture of futility and thereafter said no more. Benton left the glade by its sloping edge, tackled the steeper side, and reached a canyon's bed. A deer trail went dimly along it, through sedge and little pools made by the condensing mists. They came to a cross gulch, took it and by degrees worked out of the high terrain into lower and more open country. Far behind rose a single shot. The sunlight began to reach between the thinning tree tops and they passed across alternate strips of shadow and golden puddles of light. A vista of the far-reaching prairie opened before them. Seeing that sweep of tawny earth, the girl came out of her abstraction.

"And so I go back to the flats, where I was born. You know, Jim, I never got used to the hills. They are too secretive—too dark, too close. They kept cutting off my view. The hills have been a hiding-place for my family all this time. I don't want to hide any more!"

"From the porch of my house," said Benton, "the whole world rolls away."

"Jim," said the girl simply, "you're not through with Wolfert yet!"

"No," answered Benton. "No, not yet."

The trees made a scattering show and petered out beside a low-lying meadow. The girl spurred abreast of Benton and they crossed the meadow at a canter and entered a thicket of willows. Beyond that they halted. The Benton clearing lay ahead, buildings bathed by the mid-morning sun.

"Stay here till I go see if we've got visitors," Benton said.

Then he spurred across the open and turned the far side of the main house. There were no ponies standing about. Dismounting, he went inside the house and explored it thoroughly.

Satisfied, he went out and signaled to the girl, who rode up and dismounted.

"My dad," mused Benton, "had an idea of being a permanent citizen. He built this place to last. Even now, idle for so many years, it's still sound. A little repairing would make it snug and comfortable. Like it?"

"Another time," she answered very quietly, "I'll tell you about that."

She wheeled abruptly and entered the house. Benton grinned slowly and strolled into the yard.

There was a strange feeling in him. He had been sure of nothing. He had been knocked about, betrayed and shot at until all his thoughts were cautious and trimmed to each short day. Permanence was something he never had known. Safety had always depended on his own vigilance, his own keen perceptions. And so, with his feet planted on soil that belonged to him, that strange, unusual feeling grew stronger and stronger. It was as if he were putting his roots down like some

thirsty plant seeking water. This was the end of his journey—

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Silenced Guns



HERE was a sound, a small, quick sound, from the house. Looking about, he saw Rae standing at a second-story window. Her hand pointed, not to him, but to the north in the direction of the willows. Instantly on the alert, he turned, and his racing glance caught a slow weaving of the brush over there.

For the moment he stood still, realizing the target he made. The line of willows was five hundred feet away, admirable shelter. He immediately guessed that he was not engaged with any part of the Blackrock posse. Those men would not be hiding in the brush. It was with Wolfert's partisans he had to deal. Eyeing the willow edges, he discovered no other point of activity, and meanwhile the movement at the first point ceased. One man, then. And this man crouched for a sure aim. That meant a rifle—no revolver could effectively reach a target at such distance. Very slowly wheeling, Benton idled toward the house with an exaggerated show of indifference.

Between himself and the house stood a pump and water trough. This was the shelter he wanted against that threatening gun, and as inconspicuously as he could make it, he slightly shifted his march to come behind the heavy planks of the trough. Meanwhile his leisurely striding covered the distance.

Not until he was within a few paces

of the trough did his gait quicken. Then he made one great forward lunge.

His leap broke the intolerable strain of waiting. A crackling echo filled the clearing and a rifle bullet plucked the air hungrily beside him. He dived for the trough and rolled behind it; and then the marksman opened up with an angry abandon. Lead began to thud into the planks. Jets of dust leaped like snake heads at the exact meeting point of trough corner and ground. Tallying the shots with cold calculation, Benton was prepared when silence fell at last. But he held his place, waiting for one more explosion. He knew that trick. As the seconds ticked on, however, he grew impatient of his sightless position and decided on another old trick. He took his hat and pushed it slowly beyond the end of the planks. Instantly afterward it was whipped from his hand and went rolling away.

This was the break he waited for. A longer interval would follow before the marksman could get his fresh load into the rifle. Pulling himself erect, Benton left the trough on the run, aiming for the house. An enormous bellow drove out of the brush; swinging his glance to the willows he saw Hale Wolfert smash through them and appear in the open. Wolfert lifted his rifle and threw it away. He reached for his revolver, came directly on for a matter of a hundred feet and then wheeled. A little later he vanished behind the house.

"Damn fool," said Benton to himself. "He threw off his advantage when he dropped the rifle. What's the matter with the man?" But as he asked the question, he thought he knew the answer. Wolfert was quite sure of his own power; he now elected to close in

and end the debate with the revolver.

Benton ran along the porch of the house and reached the open yard beyond. Wolfert appeared at about the same time, not farther than two hundred yards off. He saw Benton at the same moment that Benton saw him. Instantly he turned from his direct charge, passed on to an adjacent wagon shed, and got out of sight. Benton came to a halt and waited.

He had a very brief wait. Wolfert appeared on the left of the wagon shed. He saw Benton stationed there by the smokehouse and broke forward into a run. The next moment, however, he came to a halt.

"Benton," called Wolfert, "let's do no more dodgin'. I'm comin' straight at you."

"Come on," said Benton.

Wolfert held his peace briefly, looking all about. Then he returned his gaze to Benton.

"If you've got any guts," he announced, "you'll stand your ground and settle this now."

"I'm waiting."

At that, Wolfert raised his gun and started to run with his head half lowered. The two hundred yards quickly became a hundred and fifty. Benton stood quite still, small and stray impressions registering in a mind otherwise coldly concentrated. Somewhere behind Wolfert—somewhere over by the willows—was the sound of horses solidly pacing down out of the hills.

Benton lifted his gun, seeing more clearly than anything else the big plaid checkers on Wolfert's shirt. One of those checkers was broader and brighter than the others. At a hundred yards Wolfert lifted his head and began to fire, not slowing his pace.

Unconscious of it, Benton winced as

the first slug went beside him. But he was still waiting for the interval to narrow, thinking of nothing now but one shot—only one shot—accurately placed. He felt Wolfert's second bullet hit at his feet. Then he shifted slightly in his tracks, pulled his weapon to the level of his eyes, and fired.

It was a direct hit and it jarred Wolfert out of his forward advance with the effect of a solid blow. The man straightened and stiffened, and across the brutally stamped visage passed the strange and astonished and fearful expression that was a sure forecast of his fate. Benton made no attempt to try another shot. He knew. He had seen that expression before on the faces of men just before they died in violence.

The sound of horses welled across the meadow and rather faintly he got the back-and-forth calling of many men. But it was of no importance at this moment. Wolfert shook his shoulders. His gun slipped from relaxing fingers. He issued a strangled cough, fear staring out of his eyes. And then, struggling against it, he fell loosely to the ground. Benton pivoted away, wishing to see no more. Lifting his eyes, he found the meadow full of riders. A group of four circled the house and charged toward him. All of them covered him with their guns.

"If it's Wolfert you want, Sheriff," he said calmly, "you're too late."

There was no doubt about the sheriff; his vest held a shining star.

"You're Reno?" asked the lawman.

"I used to travel under that name. I'm Hi Benton's son, back home."

"So," said the sheriff interestedly. He bent forward in the saddle, more closely inspecting Benton. "You were little Jim Benton?"

All the Blackrock riders were circled around Benton, dusty and jaded men in scowling humor. Rae McMurtree ran from the house and came across. She passed between the horses and stood beside Benton, silently defiant. It was the habit of years, this instant antagonism to the riders of the flats, and she could not break it now.

"You've run me a merry chase, Jim," said the sheriff. "You know I want you, don't you?"

"You've got a warrant sworn by Dave LaTouche from over Shell River way?"

"Yeah," said the sheriff. "Chargin' you with cattle stealin'. Sorry. Get your horse."

"The warrant is no good," explained Benton gently. He reached into his pocket. The motion brought the trained guns quickly down on him, but he smiled and drew out a folded bit of paper. He walked over and handed it up to the sheriff. "The deal was framed. This is from LaTouche."

The sheriff unfolded and read the note. He looked up, coldly angry.

"I don't get this. You and LaTouche frame a deal. LaTouche swears out a warrant and I spend my time chasin' you all over the flats. And here LaTouche says it don't mean anything. I want some clear talk on this."

"Here's your answer," said Benton, indicating the ranch. "I wanted to come back. My idea was to find the fellow that killed my dad. Well, how was I going to get into this country? If I rode into Blackrock as an ordinary hand I'd be suspected of something right away. Those fellows are always looking for the joker. Only way I could rig it was to come in all lathered, you on my trail. It made me out a crooked customer and it explained me. That's

what Blackrock needed—an explanation."

"And supposin'," said the sheriff, "I'd got you?"

"Had to take the chance," Benton drawled. "It worked, didn't it? I got in. I found the man that killed my dad. I'm back on the ranch."

"Who killed Hi?" inquired the sheriff, bending still farther forward.

"One of two men. Both of them dead—both bad enough to have done the trick and probably working together on that deal. Vilas or Wolfert."

The sheriff sat back, deeply thoughtful. His head nodded slightly as if Benton's talk satisfied some long-suspended judgment. He had a reputation for taciturnity and quick action, and now he justified the reputation by reaching into his pocket and throwing a long folded sheet to the ground. It was the warrant.

"Burn it up and consider the story finished," the sheriff said slowly, evenly. "The hills are pretty clear of trouble. Are you fixing to stay here?"

"I'm back for good," Benton stated. "This is the end of the road for me."

"As for the girl—"

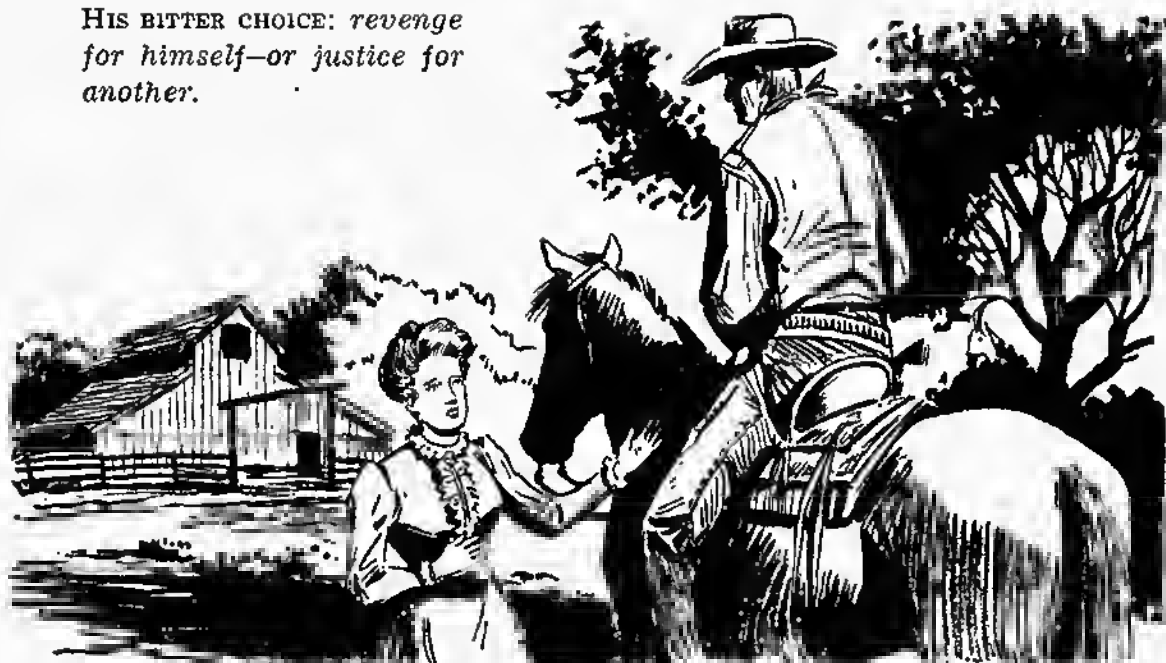
"This McMurtree stays too, Sheriff. We'll run the hills together."

The sheriff turned to his nearest man. "Put Wolfert in a saddle. We'll take that chore off Benton's hands."

Looking back to the girl, he raised his hat and bowed with a rather formal courtesy. "I'm glad to see it come out this way. Always admired you, Rae. Always had a sneaking respect for your dad. He's restin'—as we all will some day. Knowin' him, I'd say he was satisfied with the end. For you, life is only beginning. Benton, I consider you lucky. Good luck. Turn around, boys. We're through."

THE END

HIS BITTER CHOICE: *revenge for himself—or justice for another.*



The Gun

By Stephen Payne

THE man hiding in the aspens atop the hill had not eaten a square meal for a week. Twenty-four hours had passed since he had eaten at all. Gaunt and bewhiskered, his eyes sunk deep in their sockets, his skin stretched taut over high cheek bones, his drab clothing torn and ragged, he looked more like a scarecrow than a human being.

His raw, bruised, swollen feet throbbed and ached. Every muscle was a numbing torture. The gripping hunger pains were so acute that at times he twitched convulsively. Yet the same grim purpose which had driven him onward these past seven days still

held him in its grip; so eager was he to continue onward that he resented fiercely the delay caused by the meeting of two horsemen in the valley below him.

He knew these men, for this was only a few miles from the little ranch on Buffalo Creek where he once had lived. To reach it he must cross this valley, and he dared not be seen and recognized. So as sunset spread its flamboyant banners across all the jagged mountain sky line, he crouched among the aspens, waiting for these two men to end their argument and ride on.

Voices lifted in anger reached up to Joe Kildare's ears. Armstrong, the younger of the two horsemen, was accusing Drake of stealing his water. Well, let them argue; it was no skin off his nose, he had enough troubles of his own—but, damn them! they were holding him up, costing him

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precious time.

He remembered George Armstrong as a friendly, decent sort, a steady young fellow who had built himself a nice little outfit on Squaw Creek, just below Farley Drake's holdings. Joe Kildare recalled the rumors that he had heard, more than five years back, just before he had been convicted of murder and sentenced to twenty years in prison, that Armstrong was soon to marry Molly Oliver.

Kildare's eyes softened as he thought of Molly—a mighty fine girl she'd been, he mused— Now what was Drake shouting?

"Betcher life my headgate's open, Armstrong—and open she stays!"

An ornery old cuss, Drake—domineering and quarrelsome, Kildare remembered; nor was he above mavericking all the calves and colts he could get an iron on, or so it was suspected, anyway, though he'd never been caught redhanded at it. The fight brewing between him and Armstrong reminded Joe Kildare forcibly of his own troubles on the Buffalo.

Larsen Parks, a sullen and ill-tempered neighbor, had tried to run a whizzer on Kildare and, failing, had started cutting his fence. Kildare thereupon served notice that anyone he caught fooling with his fence would stop lead. Two days later, at dawn, he had been called upon to make good on his wild talk. So he had fired a rifle shot high above the head of the man wielding the wire cutters—and to Kildare's amazement the fellow had dropped in his tracks.

Swiftly investigating, Kildare had found the man, a total stranger, dead; a rifle bullet had torn clear through him. Then, most abruptly, Larsen Parks had appeared with the sheriff—

and Joe Kildare went over the road on a murder charge. He believed he knew what had happened. Parks had a rider named Flame Halliday, who had a killer's record. He must have been hidden near by and, when Kildare fired, Halliday shot simultaneously, murdering Parks's fence-cutting pawn. Still, Joe Kildare couldn't prove it—they didn't give him a chance.

Now he inched forward, alert again, interested in spite of his own driving obsession. Armstrong, face flushed, was telling Drake what he thought of him.

"I'll shut that headgate and let the water I'm entitled to run down to my ditch, and nobody's stoppin' me! Everyone knows you're a damn thief, Drake—"

"That's fightin' talk, you s.o.b.!" yelled Drake. "Fill your hand!" As the challenge rang out, his .45 was clearing leather.

The crash of gunfire echoed across the little valley. Two streaks of flame licked out toward Armstrong as he sat astride his wheeling horse, before he got his own weapon unlimbered. Then he fired once.

Drake, swaying drunkenly in the saddle, was carried a hundred feet by his snorting mount before he slipped from its back. A little spiral of dust rose slowly from the figure huddled on the dry grass.

Armstrong rode over, swung off, and looked at the man on the ground. He pushed back his hat, mopped his face with his bandanna, then mounted and loped away up the valley. Drake's frightened horse had vanished.

The brief mountain twilight was fading when the gaunt scarecrow with the sunken eyes and whisker-stubbed cheeks stole out of the aspens to limp.

down and stop by the still body of Farley Drake.

Seems like Fate gave me this chance to heel myself, he thought, unbuckling the dead man's gun belt and putting it about his own lean hips. He pried the Colt out of Drake's stiffening fingers. The effort made him weak and dizzy. How feeble and shaky he was—In this condition he could hardly hope to tackle Parks and his hired killer. Something to eat, a good night's sleep—these he needed before he would dare to try it.

But could he afford to take the time? Pursuit might be close at this very moment, though he had seen no signs of it for three days now. Another dizzy spell decided it for him—he would have to take the chance.

Three hours later he was hiding in the hayloft in the new log barn of George Armstrong's Hat Bar spread, the place closest to the scene of the afternoon's tragedy. Here he could find food, stealing into the kitchen after all had gone to bed. Here his exhausted body could get the rest it so sorely needed. Tomorrow—he licked his dry lips—ah, tomorrow, he would square accounts with Larsen Parks and Flame Halliday!

He had arrived in time to see Armstrong's hired hand go riding off toward the distant town of Buffalo. Through a lighted window of the little ranch house he could see Armstrong holding his young wife in his arms—Yes, it was Molly Ollver.

She was still as pretty as ever, but her face was white, her dark eyes wide with anxiety and fear. She clung to Armstrong as though she never meant to let him go. And her husband smoothed her hair, kissed her, patted her shoulder, seemed to be speaking

reassuring words.

All this the ragged fugitive had seen, peering into the lighted room before he climbed into the hayloft. The pain of his overtaxed muscles, the torture of his bruised and aching feet, now seemed as nothing beside the wracking hunger pains in his belly as he smelled the savory odors of coffee, hot biscuits, and beef that wafted to him across the yard. Tempted almost beyond endurance, he still stuck to his place in the concealing hay. He dared not reveal himself to ask for food—George and Molly knew him, knew his record. He could take no chances until he had found the men he had come over a hundred and fifty miles on foot to kill.

Joe Kildare peered out of the barn as a group of horsemen rode into the ranch yard. In the yellow lamplight that streamed out of the open kitchen door and through the windows of the house, he recognized Armstrong's hired hand, Sheriff Adams, and four ranchers, all of whom he had known more or less intimately in the old days. Armstrong and Molly came out to meet them.

The grizzled sheriff spoke tersely. "George, it was to your credit you sent for me. Now let's have your story."

"Me and Drake have been at odds," Armstrong answered readily. "We met in Shadow Valley late this afternoon and quarreled about water. One word led to another, and finally he went for his gun—tried to kill me. He fired twice before I finally shot, in self-defense. My first shot dropped him. That's all."

The sheriff and the four ranchers, all stony-faced, looked at each other.

"George," the old peace officer bit out, "we brought the coroner out with

us, to take the body back to Buffalo. We found Drake layin' there where he fell. Man, there wasn't a gun on Drake—not even a cartridge belt."

Joe Kildare saw Molly's hand fly to her mouth, saw her husband turn chalky-white, then flame-red, and heard him gasp:

"No gun! Why, Drake was heeled!"

"I'd like to believe that, George," said Adams. "It'd be nice for you if you could prove it. But they wasn't any witness—was there, George?"

It came to Joe Kildare that the lawman's voice was trembly; he knew Armstrong well and liked him—wanted to clear him, if he could.

The ranchers were exchanging glances again. They probably had felt sympathy with Armstrong too, in his quarrel with Drake, but they had seen Drake dead from a gunshot wound, though he himself was weaponless.

Up in the loft, Joe Kildare bit his bloodless lips and his eyes burned with a strange glow.

"Witness?" Armstrong repeated. "Why—why, no. We was alone—Sheriff, I tell you he had a gun—he started the fight! I didn't touch him afterward, either—damn it, he still had that gun in his hand when he was layin' there dead. It's the truth—Don't look at me that way, like I was a—"

He choked off, stepped close to the sheriff's stirrup, and stared bleakly up into the lawman's face. With a half-stifled sob Molly turned, hid her eyes with her arm, groped for the door frame, and went back into the house.

Adams reached into one of his saddle pockets, and a metallic jangle rang in Joe Kildare's ears like a knell of doom. The sheriff's voice seemed to leap up at him:

"Won't have to use these bracelets,

George, if you'll come along peaceful. I don't like to do this, boy—but I'm afraid it'll go hard with you; don't see how any jury can reach a verdict of less'n second-degree murder."

"God, that's tough," one of the other men said. "It'll mean twenty year in Canyon City pen. George, why in hell did you do it?"

"Twenty years!" It was Molly, back again at the door. "Oh, my God, you can't! Don't—don't take him away from me—he's all I've got, except the baby! George wouldn't lie, Sheriff Adams—the fight was forced on him!" She ran to the horses. "Oh, please, please—no!"

The sheriff's voice was husky, strained. "There ain't nothin' else I can do, Molly."

"Let's get out of here," one of the men said. "Mis' Armstrong, I'm—well, the hell of it is, George ain't got anybody to back up his say-so."

Cold sweat broke out on Joe Kildare's half-starved body. He thought of the years in prison, locked behind gray stone walls, shut away from all the things he loved—the feel of a good horse between his knees, the sweep of plain and the lift of hills, the days of hard and honest work, and the company of his kind—the bitter years when he had lived for but one thing: to come back and deal out vengeance to the men who had wronged him.

That vengeance would be sweet. Why should he meddle in this business? Why should he cheat himself out of that soul-balm that would come to him when Larsen Parks and Flame Halliday died—died by the gun with which Fate had provided him; the very gun by whose taking he had doomed an innocent man to the splinter-warping, stone-walled hell that he had

endured for five long years—and Molly Armstrong to a life of anguish and torment.

Joe Kildare saw the accused man, his shoulders bowed, swinging astride the horse his hired hand had ridden. He saw the sheriff and the others turn their horses' heads, averting their faces from sight of the weeping woman on the ground.

Then, from inside the house, came a wail: "Mamma! Daddy!"

The riders were almost out of the ranch yard when Joe Kildare stepped from the barn door. As he came, on tottering legs, he stripped the cartridge belt from his waist and held it out.

"Adams!" His voice was harsh, loud in spite of his weakness. "Here's Drake's gun! I took it off him after the fight. I saw it all—Drake shot first! It's Joe Kildare talkin'—come and get me—take me back."

Horses wheeled, came toward him. Men sprang from their saddles, took hold of him, half carried him into the lamplight.

"By heaven, it is Kildare!" exclaimed the sheriff.

"I broke out," Joe Kildare croaked. "Come back—to get Parks and Halliday. Needed a gun—bad. Saw the fight—Drake shot first, all right. I saw it all. Came here to get food, rest up—before I braced the two bastards that

framed me. I don't care now—much—long as George don't get sent up for doin' nothin', like I did—"

"Well, damn my eyes if this ain't something for the books!"

The sheriff's words came to Joe Kildare through a haze of mist in which he wobbled so that he had to be held up.

"Joe, Larsen Parks is dead. Him and that pet slidewinder of his, Flame Halliday, had a shootin' row, just three days ago. Something to do with money Halliday claimed Larsen owed him. Flame lived long enough to get something off his chest, Joe—he signed a confession that proves you didn't do that killin'."

Joe Kildare stared at him mutely. When comprehension finally came, he closed his eyes. Tears trickled slowly down his sunken cheeks.

"A full pardon's on the way already, Joe," the sheriff went on. "You'll have to go back to Canyon City and get discharged, regular—then you'll be a free man."

"Well, he won't go anywhere till he's had a square meal and a night's sleep, Sheriff," Molly Armstrong said.

Her eyes were soft and shiny. Reaching out, she took Joe Kildare's thin hand. She lifted it to her lips.

"Come in, Joe," she said. "Come in—and welcome!"



Sheriff Trouble

By Eugene Cunningham

A TOWN-TAMING young hurricane does his stuff to the tune of roaring six-guns, all for the sake of the worried and distractingly lovely daughter of Palogrande's head lawman.

CHAPTER ONE

Pretty, Attractive—and Worried

STEVE TORMEY sat the palomino horse within two yards of the girl, his black Boss Stetson at his knee, and stared at her. She turned at the gate and looked at him, absently at first, then with some interest.

"Could you tell me," he put the question again, "if Ronnie Steele's still sheriff in Palogrande?"

She shook a smooth, dark head. Something like worry came into the

clear, young face, the hazel eyes.

"He's been dead almost a year. My father—Plato Mahr—is sheriff, now."

Steve's gray eyes' narrowed. It sounded almost as if she meant—and worse luck!

"I'm certainly surprised—and mightily sorry—to hear that," he told her slowly, beginning to frown. "I mean about Ronnie bein' dead, not about yo' father bein' sheriff. I hadn't seen Ronnie or heard from him for quite a spell. But I was ridin' this way an'—"

"He was shot. Ambushed. Murdered

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beside the road a mile or so out of town. A special election was held and my father was elected. He used to own the general store here and he had a great many friends. You—knew Ronnie Steele very well?"

She was just making conversation, he thought. Something was on her mind, something that weighed there heavily. He guessed that easily. He nodded.

"We were boys together. He was older by five-six years, but we punched cows together along the Pecos. A good man, Ronnie. I gather nobody was caught for that bushwhackin'?"

"Nobody. It was probably the Whinrights, Snake and Curt."

"The Whinrights. Didn't they go up for life, from Palogrande? Why, it must've been yo' father that sent 'em up."

She looked hard at him, and the clear face went dusky red. But, very slowly, after an instant of staring, she nodded her head.

"Yo' father handy? I'd like to talk to him," Steve said.

"He's downtown somewhere, I suppose. Around the courthouse. Are you—an officer from anywhere?"

Again there was that oddness in her tone. Steve looked at her thoughtfully, but he couldn't probe through to the cause of it, however much he tried. She was simply the prettiest girl he had ever seen, and about the most attractive—and as worried as any he had ever encountered.

"No," he said. "No, I'm not an officer. But I wouldn't mind bein' a deputy sheriff. In fact, I sort o' had it in view to ask Ronnie for a job. But unless a man's got connections in the country, it's hard to land a job. A stranger is crowded out."

On impulse, then, he cleared a foot from his tapaderoed stirrup and swung down, letting the split-reins fall. He stood close to her and his high-nosed, tightmouthed, daredevil face softened with a smile. She frowned a little, looking up at him.

"My name's Steve Tormey," he told her. "An' I'm a kind of fortune teller. I'm a stranger to you, an' yet I'd like to ask you a question an' not have you feel that a stranger was trampin' in on private property. Is there somethin' on yo' mind that a fella about my size an' weight could help with? I haven't got a thing in the world to do, an' the rest o' my life to finish it in. So—"

"There's nothing," she said quickly. "Nothing at all. But what made you think there was? Do I—look worried?"

"Miss Mahr, you do that! If there's somethin' about the sheriff's job, an' you don't mind tellin' me—"

"You're a nice-looking boy!" she said suddenly. "I—I am worried! About my father. About those Whinrights!"

"But they're in Huntsville— Did they leave friends?"

"I think they did. But that isn't the thing. They have sent us a message. They are going to break out of the penitentiary and come back. A note was plinned to our door with a dagger, saying so. They're coming back and they're going to kill him!"

Steve Tormey frowned. He shook his sandy head.

"Lead travels both ways," he suggested. "With the warnin' he's got, he can meet 'em with a sawed-off shotgun an' save the expense o' shippin' 'em back to Huntsville."

"He's not that kind of man! That's the trouble!" she said almost hysterically. "He can handle the routine of the office, but he's not a fighter, not a

gunman. The Whinrights are deadly. The whole county walked on tiptoe around them. If they get out and come back—oh! I wish he hadn't run for the office. I wish he'd let Zeke Ranier have it. I wished that at the time."

From the same direction that Steve Tormey had approached Palogrande, a horseman came. He rode at an easy, running walk, on a black as tall as Steve Tormey's palomino horse. He was a good deal bigger man than Steve, nearly six feet tall, wide of shoulder, looking bigger under the wide, white Stetson he wore cockily. He pulled in at the gate and stared at them, heavy squarish face unpleasant, black eyes, close-set against a hooked nose, wandering over Steve's dusty overall-jumper and pants. He made a rasping noise and looked at the girl.

"Hi! Lucille! Where's the old man? The hon'able sher'f?"

"Downtown, Frisk," the girl said. She seemed nervous, now.

"Who's this guy?" Frisk said with a head-jerk toward Steve. He didn't look at him. Steve might have been some unimportant animal, judging from the big puncher's manner.

"Excuse me!" Lucille Mahr said quickly. "Mr. Steve Tormey— Mr. Frisk Ranier. Mr. Tormey is an old friend of Ronnie Steele, Frisk. He didn't know that Ronnie had been killed. He came by to see him. They were old friends," she repeated, a little nervous.

"Didn't know he was dead, huh?" Frisk grinned, lifting one side of his hard mouth unpleasantly. "Well, Steele never knew he was alive before he cashed."

"You told him that, to his face— when he was alive?" Steve inquired mildly. "You see, I don't know you

well enough to know what scars you have got."

"Yeh?" Frisk Ranier snarled, leaning forward belligerently. "Well, I can tell you one thing right quick, Mr. Mouthy Saddle Tramp! Didn't none o' the Z take a thing off Ronnie Steele. An' me—well, I take jist a little less'n most, off anybody!"

"You wouldn't have had much luck tryin' to take anything off Ronnie. That's so!" Steve grinned. "You an' yo' whole family. Not monkeyin' with a real man. Not monkeyin' with Ronnie Steele. Oh! I play my bets clean across—"

Lucille Mahr inserted herself quickly between them. She caught hold of Steve's jumper sleeve, holding it with nervous tightness. Her back was turned to the big, furious-faced Frisk.

"Please don't!" she whispered. "Please!"

He took his eyes away from Frisk and looked at her smilingly.

"Go talk to my father!" she said in ordinary tone. "Please!"

Steve nodded. He turned and passed the reins up over the palomino's neck and mounted with quick, easy movement. Still, he held the black Stetson. He ignored Frisk Ranier and looked at her.

"I'll be seein' you?" he drawled.

She looked at Frisk, then back at him. Her face was dusk-red again. She nodded.

"I—I hope so!" she said in a defiant tone. "I hope so."

He rode on, settling the Stetson on his sandy head. He thought of Ronnie Steele and his face hardened into an ugly cast. It seemed to be a nasty kind of country, or perhaps he had been seeing only the ugly side of it. Frisk Ranier.

*But, Lucille. Lucille— There's some-
thin' to make up for a hell of a lot o'
things. "I'll be seein' you?" "I—I hope
so!" No chance o' her thinkin' the way
I was thinkin', o' course. What would
there be about the likes o' me, to make
her feel that way! But, can happen a
hairpin like me might have a chance.*

CHAPTER TWO

Easy Go



STEVE saw that Palom-
grande was rather
larger than he had ex-
pected the county seat
to be. There was only
one main street. But
it was quite long and
on the cross streets
were good, solid buildings. He jogged
into the business blocks and looked to
right and left. Out of a big wooden
store came two men. Both were tall,
but one was tall and black and big and
reminded Steve of Frisk Ranier, and
when he turned squarish, hook-nosed,
fleshy face toward the street, there
was no questioning the relationship!

The other man was obviously Plato
Mahr, the sheriff. He was six feet tall
and very narrow of stooping shoulders.
He was gray and his hollow-cheeked
face was warily inoffensive. One long
steady stare at Mahr and Steve under-
stood what Lucille Mahr had meant,
about her father's inability to handle
such as the Whinrights, or any other
fast-smoking hardcases. He would look
natural only in a grocer's apron, with
pencil over his ear.

The sheriff said something in a drab,
tired voice to the big Ranier. He moved
on along the sidewalk and Ranier, with
a long stare at Steve Tormey, went the
other way toward a saloon.

Steve pushed the palomino in closer
to the sidewalk. But before he came
up to the sheriff, a galloping horse cut
across the street, pushed by a stocky,
redheaded cowboy who pulled in his
mount flashily, set him down on his
tail, and called Mahr.

"Telegram," he added, holding out
the yellow paper. "Operator give me
this to bring to you in a hurry, Sheriff.
Whinrights has busted out o' the pen',
it says."

"Whinrights," Mahr said in a thick,
shaking voice. His lank hand, coming
out mechanically to take the folded
paper, began to shake. His eyes half
closed and Steve saw the Adam's apple
in the scrawny throat bob convulsively.
He looked deathly sick.

The cowboy sat staring at him. His
heavy mouth twitched contemptuously.
He shook his head and with a shrill
yell rammed in the hooks and jumped
his little buckskin ahead. He went
tearing down the street to that saloon
into which Ranier had vanished. He
flung himself off and hitched the
horse, ducked under the crossbar of
the hitch rack, and swaggered in.

Steve pushed the palomino in
abreast of the sheriff. He looked with
grim distaste at the strained face, the
blank-staring eyes, the sagging mouth
and tremulous hand of Mahr. He
swung down.

"So they busted the pen' an' are
headin' back to pay off old scores," he
drawled.

Mahr did not turn, did not seem to
hear.

Steve repeated it, pushing up directly
in front of Mahr.

"What? Huh?" the sheriff said stupidly.
"What y' want?"

"First," Steve said deliberately, "I'd
like to see you put a bone in yo' back!"

Stand up like a man no matter what you feel like! Ain't but two Whinrights an' if they're twice as salty as the average, that only makes four of 'em! *Por amor de dios*, man! Stiffen up! Maybe she's not so bad! Maybe I can help you some."

"You don't know them Whinrights," Mahr said in a sick voice. "You don't know 'em. They're jist devils! 'Twas plumb bull-accident we got 'em that time. Now, it'll be different. They'll come a-sneakin' up to a winder an' le' go through it. They'll dry-gulch me from alongside the trail, like they done Ronnie Steele. They—"

"Listen!" Steve said fiercely in a low voice. He put out a hard, strong hand to catch Mahr's sleeves. He shook it savagely. "Are you yellow all the way through? You aim to stand here on the street like a kicked alley cur an' howl you're goin' to be killed? Ain't there anything that'll make you ashamed o' yo'self? Here! I rode in, aimin' to ask Ronnie Steele for a job as deputy. I'll ask you for the same thing. Give me a job as deputy an' le' me take the chances o' the Whinrights landin' in town!"

Mahr blinked at Steve dully for a moment. Then something like interest, something like hope, came into the glassy eyes.

"You're jist a kid," he said, then, and slumped once more.

"Let's go down to yo' office an' augur some," Steve said, grinning slightly. "I haven't got a whole load o' rings on my horns, but I'm not worryin' about a wagonload o' Whinrights!"

Mahr nodded uncertainly. He began to walk shamblingly along the sidewalk. Steve mounted again and rode after him. So they came to the two-story courthouse where a faded sign

hung over a door: SHERIFF'S OFFICE—TAX ASSESSOR AND COLLECTOR.

Out of the fullness of his observation, Steve understood why so apparent a misfit as Plato Mahr had run for the sheriff's office. In a county like this, the fees of the united offices would total from two-hundred-fifty to four hundred or even more, a month.

He tied the palomino at the sheriff's hitch rack, bobbed under the bar, and went clink-clumping across the board sidewalk into the office. Mahr was standing at a long pine table. He was staring fixedly at the telegram. Steve glanced flashingly around the large, bare room with its plank walls plastered with dingy reward flyers, its big, old-fashioned iron safe and rolltop oak desk. A barred door was in the back wall—to the jail, he thought.

He came over to the table, half sat, half leaned on it. He grinned easily at Mahr. He was well pleased with himself, Steve was. The notion had come as he talked to Lucille at her gate: to slide into her father's employ, take the hard and dangerous work off his hands, and see a great deal of Lucille Mahr. And it had worked out so simply!

"Now, these Whinrights," he drawled, "they are probably bad enough, but at least we know they're comin'. An' if they come a-shootin' an' Palogrande sheriff's office meets 'em shootin'—hell, somebody's goin' down! No two ways about that. Gi' me a chance, Mr. Mahr. I'll try to make you mightily pleased you swore me in."

"You don't look old enough," Mahr objected, but feebly. "If I got to git a shootin' dep'ty or two, to back me up—"

"Ex-act-ly!" a grim, harsh voice said, from the door.

Steve turned his head a little. His face did not change, except that it hardened almost imperceptibly at the sight of that big Ranler who had gone into the saloon.

"Ex-act-ly!" Ranier said, again.

He came inside. He looked Steve contemptuously up and down. Then he moved over to stand beside Mahr and looked him contemptuously up and down. Mahr starred dully at him.

Steve heard other feet outside. His eyes shuttled away from Ranier and found Lucille Mahr on the threshold; saw Frisk Ranier crowding after.

"Listen, Plato," the elder Ranier said grimly. "Soon'a Red tol' me about that telegram about the Whinrights, I knowed yuh was in plenty grief, plumb bogged down. So, when Frisk came along, I told him what he's to do. Now I do' know a thing about this cowboy. But what you need's a fightin' dep'ty an' you don't need to look a bit farther'n Frisk to fill that order. You swear Frisk in an' if them looney, gunnin' Whinrights hit Palogrande, they'll mighty quick slide under the daisies."

"Shore!" Frisk Ranier said emphatically, staring at Steve.

Steve said nothing, merely looked at the girl blankly. She made a hopeless little motion of slim shoulders and looked away.

"Well, I ain't got a dep'ty," the sheriff said at last. "I ain't aimin' to run from Snake an' Curt Whinright, poison as they be. I never figgered on Frisk, no. But—"

"Well!" Ranier said arrogantly. "You can start figgerin' on him, now. No sense to pickin' some green kid from outside the county, when the best man in the county la willin'."

"A' right, Zeke," Mahr nodded, very

like some mechanical toy. "I'll swear him in, an' I'm mighty grateful."

CHAPTER THREE

Clean-up Marshal



G RINNING at the girl, Steve slipped down from the table and went out. He unhitched the palomino. Lucille came out to him.

"I—I'm sorry," she said. "I hoped that my

father would deputize you. Of course, Frisk is a very efficient man. But I am sorry that you'll go. You were so kind, about asking me the trouble and—and—"

"Shoo!" Steve grinned. "I'd like to have that deputy's job. For two reasons: to sort o' ride herd on yo' father an' because it'd le' me see you, wantin' it a lot—wantin' it more'n I ever wanted to see anybody."

"I've an idea!" she said quickly, and she blushed. "Go up to the store and find Mr. Leemans. He's the—oh! the acting mayor, you might call him. He runs the town, as Zeke Ranier runs the county. Ask him for the job of city marshal! It's been vacant for months, but Mr. Leemans has been thinking of hiring someone. He may not think you're old enough, but it's a chance!"

"You're a plumb darlin'!" Steve breathed, for out of the office, now, the Raniers were coming. "But I knew that the minute I laid eyes on you. I'll take that job, if I work for nothin' a year!"

He passed the reins up and swung into the swellfork kak. He touched his hat rim as he grinned at the girl, then rode upstreet.

When he got down at the big store

and hitched the palomino, he had only two yards to go, to find the important Mr. Leemans. That gentleman, fat, pompous, red-faced and middle-aged, very similar to a turkey gobbler, was talking vehemently to an ancient cowman. The subject, Steve discovered instantly, was the return of the Whinrights. Mr. Leemans was agitated.

Steve pushed up to the storekeeper. Leemans stared at him.

"Mr. Leemans," said Steve thoughtfully, "I would like to talk to you in private a li'l bit. Talk to you as the mayor o' Palogrande. I am not a talkin' person an' so I like to come to Plumb Headquarters, to the Last Word, when I say my piece."

"Well!" Leemans said jerkily. "Well! I dunno's I could say I'm the Last Word in Palogrande. I ain't really the mayor, you see. We don't have a mayor. But—come on in, young feller."

Steve nodded respectfully and followed the storekeeper into the long dusky room of the store, and back to the partitioned office. Inwardly, he grinned. Leemans sat down, waved him to another chair beyond the cluttered desk.

"O' course," Steve said thoughtfully, "it's maybe like the Raniers claim, that the town don't need a marshal. The Raniers, now that Frisk is Mahr's deputy, can run the town an' county."

"They'd like to!" Leemans sputtered, leaning forward. "Yeh, like to. But they ain't doin' it, yet. We can settle about the marshal job. You after it?"

"If you feel that, with the Whinrights comin' hack to wipe up the town, hit the stores an' all, you can use a marshal that will ride the job plumb steady—ycah, I want it. Was Ronnie Steele a friend of yours? I know he wasn't o' the Raniers!"

"He was a good friend," Leemans nodded. "The Raniers didn't buck him, either. Did you know Steele?"

"Raised with him. Punched cows with him. Worked as stock detective with him. Rode in, today, to hit him for a job."

"Well! That's all the recommendation we need. You can have the job on a month's trial. Fifty a month. What's your name?"

Steve got up, a few minutes later, pinning onto his dungaree jumper a large nickel-plated shield which bore the word *Marshal*.

"Now," Leemans grinned at him, "I feel a lot better for the talk, an' for hirin' you, Tormcy. You better belt on a couple o' six-shooters an' when the Whinrights come in, if they do come in, pour it onto 'em. I want you to keep a close watch on this place because next to Mahr they'll be after me. We had plenty trouble."

Steve nodded and went down the store's length. Customers looked curiously at the marshal's badge, then at his slender-seeming middle height, his quiet brown face, and his gunless exterior. He went out on the street, got the palomino, and rode it across to a boarding-corral, where he left it.

Coming back to the main street, Steve met the Raniers. They stopped short, to gape at him. Frisk shook his head dumbly.

"City marshal!" he gasped. "Well! Can you beat it! Leemans don't care *what* he hircs for marshal, looks like."

Steve grinned. He asked about the lock-up.

"You can use mine, in case you should happen to git ary prisoner," Frisk said, and laughed. "But I reckon if you was to try and arrest somebody, it'd be right hard to tell if you was

bringin' in the prisoner or he was draggin' you some'r's."

Steve grinned more widely, but not pleasantly. He went on past them, headed for the courthouse. But he found the girl before he got there. She was coming out of a narrow-fronted store with a package. She looked first at the glittering shield, then at his face. She smiled.

"Thanks a lot for tellin' me about Leemans," he said quietly. "How's your father? Now that he's got Frisk Ranler to do all the fightin', looks like it'd be a good time to take a trip."

"I wish he would. He's really not well. But he has a stubborn streak in him. He hates fighting. He never was a fighter. He likes peace and quiet, but he knows that the county expects him to run away from the Whinrights. So he's suddenly decided to stay right here and—and face being killed. I wish I could persuade him to go up to Dallas or Fort Worth or Temple, and have specialists look him over. But he won't. Mr. Tormey—"

"Have to be 'Mister'?" he asked her softly. "I'd a lot rather you said Steve. Would it strain you just a lot?"

"Steve," she said, and flushed. "Steve, I'm glad you're going to be here. Even though my father says you're just a boy, that Frisk makes an ideal chief deputy, and that you couldn't hope to handle killers like the Whinrights, especially Snake. Curt is bad enough, but he's nothing, compared to his brother. You have to get a pistol, don't you? I saw a carbine on your saddle."

"I reckon your father's right, accordin' to his lights," Steve said. "An' if these Whinrights are so plumb deadly, maybe a couple shotguns'll be what I need. Well, I'll try to be around to kind of pick up the pieces after Frisk.

If he'll knock 'em down, I'll stack 'em— Who's that doin' all the yellin'?"

She listened, half turning. From a saloon two or three buildings down the street came wolf-howls. Someone was announcing himself as a terror of the prairies. She looked frowningly at Steve.

"It's Dud Ables. He's Zeke Ranier's foreman on the Z. He's not a bad sort when he's sober. But he comes out and just raises Cain when he's drunk. He was the cause of the last marshal leaving. The marshal tried to arrest him. Dud put him in the watering-trough, after he'd taken the marshal's gun."

"Goodness! It'll be an education just to see him!" Steve cried. His face lit with gentle interest. "Be seein' you; don't you never think I won't. Uh—you don't mind?"

"Of course not. But you're not going to try to arrest Dud?"

"He oughtn't to disturb the peace like that," Steve said gravely. "Likely he just needs a word or two of remindin'."

He touched his hat rim and walked briskly down to the corner of the saloon. He turned between it and the other building, walked down its length to the rear, and so around the corner. He entered the saloon by the back door and stood looking toward the bar.

A squatty, swaggering man, red-haired, red-faced, amazingly freckled, stood by himself in the bar's center. He had a pistol in his hand. He was pounding on the bar and yelling ferociously. A pallid bartender was expostulating.

"Shut up!" Dud Ables bellowed. "If y' don't like how I'm hammerin' y' damn bar, come on out an' say so. How'd y' like fer me to take out my knife an' start whittlin' on the bar, or

on y' gizzard, maybe? Y' want to think about things like that!"

"But, Dud!" the unhappy bartender whined. "You hadn't ought—"

CHAPTER FOUR

Trough Justice



CROSSING the space to the bar silently and swiftly, Steve was behind Ables before anyone noticed him. His hand shot out. He twitched the pistol from Ables's hand and

stepped back.

"Barkeep's plumb right," he said gently. "You hadn't ought to beat up other folks' property. An' the noise you been makin'! That's disturbin' the peace, you know. I thought I'd tell you. I aim to marshal this town fair an' right. I'll tell you once."

Dud Ables had whirled with the jerk of the gun. He gaped at the slender figure incredulously. His piggish blue eyes roved to the shield, then up to Steve's unconcerned face.

"Gimme that gun, you!" he roared. "I'll bust y' in two! I'll—"

Steve stared narrowly at him, then stepped another pace backward. He bent swiftly, put the Colt on the floor, then walked at the Z foreman. Ables snarled and rushed at him. Steve bent slightly, caught Ables about the thighs, and heaved.

The heavier man went hurtling over Steve. It was his misfortune that a round-bellied iron stove was directly in his trajectory. He struck it headfirst and knocked it over. He sprawled motionless beside it, with stovepipe and soot over all.

Steve went across, picked up the

pistol, and stuck it into his waistband, then stopped to catch Ables's shoulder. He dragged him out of the mess and looked at him, then grinned faintly.

"Dear, dear," he said softly. "If it didn't knock him out! Water's the thing to bring him to. Yes, sir, water."

He heaved the limp figure up to his shoulder and walked out of the bar-room to the sidewalk. The watering-trough was ten steps away. He moved to it, while behind him, at the saloon's swing doors and on the sidewalks, men stood staring. He stooped a trifle and there was a mighty splash as Dud Ables flopped into the water. Steve watched him with anxious face. He took Ables's collar and ducked him, lifted him, ducked him, until Ables came back to consciousness with a great thrashing of arms and tremendous sputterings. Then Steve turned him deftly face up.

"Be still!" he said. "That mouth o' yours is en-tirely too big an' loose-hung. I'm tired o' hearin' so much racket. I'm goin' to let you out, now. An' I'm not jailin' you—now. But you remember one thing, Ables. You start raisin' hell around town an' I'll have you in the jug so quick it'll make your head spin."

He dragged the heavy figure over the trough edge and let it drop. Ables was a miserable-seeming caricature of the belligerent bully he had been at the bar. Blood seeped down his forehead and into his eyes, from the gash in his head. His right hand was swelling, as with sprained or broken fingers. He got up painfully and all but fell again. He staggered off without a word.

"Good—work!" a voice said enthusiastically, if softly.

It was Leemans, grinning like the party of the first part in the cat and

the canary fable. Steve fell into step with him and they walked toward the store.

"You better watch out for Zeke and Frisk, though," Leemans warned him. "They won't like you manhandlin' that hard fo'man of theirs. Next to Frisk, he was supposed to be the poisonest man in the country, now the Whinrights ain't with us."

He turned sober instantly, with mention, Steve thought, of the dread name Whinright. Steve paid little attention. He had almost forgotten Dud Ables. He was thinking hard of Lueille Mahr.

"Who is the doctor?" he asked abruptly.

Leemans stared at him. "A young feller named Higgins. Good boy, too. Athlete. Run like a jack rabbit and box and wrestle and he's an all-fired fine shot. That's his office, across the way yonder."

"See you after a while," said Steve, turning to cross the street.

Steve went through the doctor's open door and a big red-haired, blue-eyed young man looked up from the table where he was writing.

"Another marshal!" he cried. "Another sacrifice on the altar of civic righteousness. Sit down—sit down, friend. What was the commotion a minute ago? Not Dud Ables trying to put you in the watering-trough?"

"No—it was me puttin' Dud Ables in the trough. But I got somethin' to ask you, Doc. I reckon you know about the Whinrights?"

"About their breaking Huntsville and threatening to come back and kill a few of us? And Mahr's case of shakes, and Leemans's? Oh, yes. I'm on their list—knoeked Curt Whinright through a store window one fine morning."

"I didn't know that. But, Doc, I'm thinkin' about Mahr. He's all serewed up to die like a he-ro, just to show the town he ain't afraid o' the Whinrights. Well! I'd hate to see that. I was wonderin' if you couldn't send him off to Dallas, to be looked over by the special does up there?"

"He'd see through that," Dr. Higgins said, shaking his head. "Only chance I see is that his fright will combine with his actual poor health—or rather, act so upon it—that he'll be knocked out."

"But if it don't—" Steve stopped, contemplated Higgins, then leaned eagerly forward. "Doc, couldn't you give him some medicine that'd put him to bed for a few days?"

Higgins stared, then began to grin. He nodded.

"I certainly could do that! I can put him to bed and make him so sick he'll stay there for a while. But if I do that for you, will you help me do something? Something the beloved sheriff and his newly acquired deputy won't do?"

"What's that?" Steve asked.

"Grab Marquez!"

"Who's Marquez?" Steve frowned. "What's he done?"

"He's done one murder that's of record. He'll do another tonight if he's not stopped. But Mahr and Frisk Ranier insist he's not even in town. I know he is! He's hanging out at the Toro, a tough Mex joint in South Town. He's going to kill a kid named Torres tonight. Torres is set to marry a girl Marquez wants. Will you go with me, after a while, down to the Toro?"

"O' course. If he's in town, an' a murderer, he's in my bailiwick. It's my job—an' none o' yours. I'll go hunt him."

"No, I'm going too. But I'll keep in

the background. I know Marquez and you don't. Ready now?"

Before they went out of the doctor's door Steve made one slight adjustment in his costume. He unpinned the shield from his jumper and put it into a pocket.

"I'll walk straight down to this Toro place," he told Higgins. "I'll go in side an' look around. You can stop behind me and if you see this Marquez, tell me. Has he got any scars or anything?"

"No scars. But he's tall, almost as tall as I. His face is yellow, not brown. His nose is as hooked as the Raniers' familly proboscls. His eyes are very small and very dark. He usually wears gray cotton pants, rammed into half-boots. And I remember that he had stars and crescents on his bootlegs."

"I'd know him in church," Steve nodded. "Let's go."

He attracted no attention when he got to that end of the main street off which jutted ragged cross streets lined with unplastered 'dobes. He found the Toro without difficulty, for a blue bull announced it—a large, snorty bull on a plank sign over the Toro's central door. Without seeming to take care to be quiet, he came very softly up to the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

An Old Spanish Custom



IN THE Toro, there was a bar of sorts, home-made of native wood. There was a store on the other side of the big room. There were some homemade tables and benches and rawhide-bottomed chairs.

Steve did not need to wait for Hig-

gins to identify Marquez. He saw him sitting at a table, face to the door. And at the table with him was that red-headed cowboy who had brought the telegram to Sheriff Mahr, and who had gone instantly to tell Zeke Ranier of its contents. Somehow, the association seemed odd to Steve.

But he went in and loafed over to the bar, stopping near the table. He could see the cowboy staring at him. When Marquez looked suddenly his way he thought probably the cowboy had jogged the Mexican's knee under the table. But he asked for tequila in English. The bartender spoke a Spanish sentence, asking what brand of tequila he wanted.

Steve shook his head impatiently. "*No sabe*," he said, and, again, "Tequila!"

"He does not speak Spanish," Marquez grunted to the cowboy. "You say he is now the marshal? And that he threw Ables into the water trough? It does not seem possible! Is he one of those fools who does not wear a gun? I do not see one about him, or sign of one. I think I will amuse myself, *Rojo amigo*—watch!"

Marquez came up in a lithe, swift movement. He lounged over to where Steve stood with the tequila lifted in his hand, humming. Marquez jostled Steve's elbow. The tequila splashed upon Steve's jumper, upon his face, upon the floor. Marquez's face was twisted apologetically. He stepped back, flinging up both hands in a gesture of concern and spoke in smooth Spanish, in the tone which would be used in an apology:

"Dirty cur of the alleys! Never yet has there been born the gringo who was not the fool, the child, beside Pedro Marquez. I will now play with

you for a while, before with a sharp knife I trim those ears and send you howling back to show all the handiwork of Pedro Marquez on Palogrande streets."

The listening Mexicans bellowed. They leaned against the bar, against each other. They dropped heads upon the tables and roared. For Steve's irritated expression had softened. He was smiling at Marquez. The Mexican turned with artistically bewildered face, to stare at the laughing men. They laughed the louder, the more hysterically. He shook his head and turned back to Steve.

"It will be very funny! That silly ancient, the sheriff, he will blink and he will say, 'But Marquez is not in town!' How can a man who is not here trim your ears? Ah, yes, it is too sad. Too sad that you do not understand the Spanish."

Steve gestured toward the chair at Marquez's table. He moved over to it, put his hand on its back, and smiled at Marquez. The redheaded cowboy was leaning back in his chair, his mouth working.

"But," said Steve, in fluent *pela'o* Spanish, "who said that I do not understand Spanish?"

He pushed sideways with his hip. The table moved, catching the cowboy off balance. He fell backward. The chair came flashing up in Steve's hands. It crashed down upon Marquez's head. The murderer dropped with the groan of a pole-axed bull.

There was still the shaky silence that had come with Steve's words in Spanish. He stepped backward until he was against the wall. Sidelong, he looked at the redhead, who was furiously scrambling up, hand going inside his shirt.

"Don't you!" Steve snapped at him. "Or I'll stitch buttonholes up an' down your bellyband!"

His hands twinkled. The flaps of his jumper front twitched. Out of the John Wesley Hardin vest's slanting holsters came twin walnut-handled Colts. The one in Steve's left hand continued downward. It crashed across the red head of the cowboy. He slumped, six-gun falling out of his limp fingers.

"A'right, Doc," Steve called, and Higgins stepped into the room. In his hand the doctor carried, lightly and easily, the very short-barreled shotgun which he had worn into South Town under his coat. "Right on back!" Steve grinned.

"I'll take *Rojo* outside, first," he decided. "Watch Marquez a minute. If he wiggles, let him have the blue whistlers."

He reholstered the Colts, caught the redhead by pants seat and jumper back, and swung him up easily. He walked through the room to the front door and half turned, letting the cowboy fall to the dust of the street.

He went back and, with Higgins standing guard by the table, took Marquez with left hand under chin, right hand at the back of the head. He did not lift the senseless murderer; he merely dragged him to the door. Higgins followed. There broke, then, a gabble of voices within the Toro. But nobody came out of the door.

There were horses in front of the Toro. Steve grunted and Higgins went out and got two, taking down the lariats from the big-horned saddles. A loop under the arms of each prisoner, a turn around the horns, then Higgins went into one saddle, Steve into the other. They started toward town. Behind them in the dust the prisoners

plowed along.

Marquez yelled suddenly and Steve looked back at him. Marquez caught hold of the lariat and jumped to his feet. Steve kicked the Mexican horse into a trot, then into a lope. Marquez began to run, faster and faster.

Steve grinned tightly. Marquez could do nothing but hang to the lariat and try to keep his feet. So they came to the front of Leemans's store. Steve kicked the pony to an extra burst of speed, whirled him off to one side, and snapped Marquez into the air. He threw himself out of saddle and ran down the rope as to a calf.

He had a gun in his hand, now. He rammed the muzzle into Marquez's belly, searched him swiftly, took a pair of pearl-handled .38s, self-cockers, and a dagger from him.

Leemans and others from the store porch came slowly out. Higgins rode toward them, with the redhead walking beside his stirrup. Steve grinned at the storekeeper.

"I'd like a couple of tug chains an' some locks. I could slam Marquez into the calaboose, but I'd rather chain him up to the cottonwood yonder. Not much chance his gettin' out, then."

When he had adjusted a trace chain around the Mexican's neck and locked it, then locked another chain around the tree trunk, he looked thoughtfully at the cowboy, who stood sullenly by Higgins. The cowboy was a shade uncertain of face.

"What the hell's this?" Frisk Ranier demanded abruptly, shoving beligerently through the watching, grinning townsmen.

"Just tryin' to figureate," Steve said mildly, "if it ought to be an arrest or just a warnin'. What about it, Red? You still feel like teamin' up wth the

likes o' that kilier, Marquez? Or, if I let you off this time—"

"If *you* let him off!" Frisk Ranier cried. He leaned forward a little, furious-faced, glaring at Steve. "*You!* What the hell!"

Steve passed the weapons taken from Marquez to Higgins. Then Frisk Ranier jumped savagely at him, hands curled into huge, knotted fists.

But Steve was not there, on the receiving end. He slid backward snallly, twisted to one side on Frisk's left, shot a straight, short, right-hand punch that sent Frisk sideways to his knees and one propping hand.

Frisk shook his head dizzily and jumped up. Steve went flashingly in again. Twice he struck the big man, setting his feet, hooking right and left in terrific alternation to the two angles of Ranier's jaw.

"And that's that," Dr. Higgins nodded. "How about it, Red?"

"Never said a word," Red shrugged.

"Go climb onto your goat an' pull out o' town for the day," Steve told him. "When you come back tomorrow, come quiet."

CHAPTER SIX

Fix and Finish



LATE that afternoon Steve again called on Higgins. They sat in the doctor's parlor for a while, over a bottle of excellent whisky and cigars of a quality all but unknown in the cow country. When Steve got up, toward dark, they understood each other very thoroughly.

"Watch for Frisk," Higgins said quietly, at the door. "He's a born bush-

whacker, and he's got a grudge against you, Steve, for showing him up before the whole town. But he hated you before that—because a certain young lady fell head over heels in love with you, on sight."

"Ha, ha," Steve said grimly. "I might fool everybody in the world, Doc, but I couldn't fool myself. No girl like that's goin' to fall in love with me on sight."

He went downstreet, adding under his breath, "No matter if *I* did fall in love with *her* like that!"

He saw nothing of Frisk as he went to a restaurant and ate. Coming out, he walked down to the livery corral and saddled his palomino to ride out to the sheriff's house.

Lucille came to the door when he knocked.

"Oh!" she said. "I—I didn't expect you."

"How's your dad? Higgins told me he was doctorin' him."

"He's really very sick. Not dangerously so, Dr. Higgins says. But terribly nauseated, and very weak. You—have had trouble?"

She came out onto the veranda. They sat down in a cypress porch swing. He could not see her features, merely the white blur of her face above the dark blue of her dress.

"Nothin' to speak about. What'd you hear?"

"Dud Ables! And Marquez! And Frisk Ranier! You must be careful about Frisk—he's really a dangerous man when he's angry—Do you like Palogrande?"

He put out a hand cautiously and touched hers. She pulled her hand away and he jerked his back.

"I—I certainly do, as to some of the people. I can't tell, though, how the—

well, the people I like, feel about me."

She stood up quickly. "I must go in and see if Father wants anything," she said. "I—well, I wouldn't worry, Steve, about how the people feel toward you. Mr. Leemans—"

"Yes—and the others?"

"I wouldn't worry," she repeated, and laughed. "Not for a minute!" She vanished indoors.

He rode the palomino back in considerable of a daze, pulling in at the jail when he had intended going to the livery corral. But he got down and put the palomino in the jail corral, behind the courthouse. There might be a little riding to do, after all.

He walked from the jail toward the center of town and met Zeke Ranier, who looked thoughtfully at him, grunted, and went on. He made a round of the whole town, with a look at Leemans's store. Coming back, he was almost at the courthouse when in the pallid light from saloon windows he saw Frisk Ranier and a prisoner, coming out of the shadows that lay thick between two buildings. The prisoner, a shabby figure, was reeling grotesquely.

"Come on, you!" Frisk was snarling at him. "I'll bust y' damn head in a minute. Come on! You're goin' to have company." Then he stopped short and looked at Steve.

"There's a prisoner ought to be yours," he growled. "Him an' some more was tryin' to get into the feed-store back door. If you'll ram his rump into the lock-up, I know where the rest went. Here's the keys."

Steve nodded, grinning faintly. He took the iron keys and the prisoner's arm, leading him toward the jail. Frisk vanished between the buildings again.

They went into the sheriff's office and Steve took a match from his hat.

band. He shoved the man toward the center of the darkroom and the match flared in his hand. He saw the man's movement as a blur and, as the gun flame came with the roar of the shot, he was down on one knee and to the side of where he had been. The match was out in a snap. There was a creaking sound as the man shifted his weight.

Out of his pants pocket Steve worked his heavy stock knife. He flung it so that it rapped the door beyond the man, then sprang up and toward the man as he jumped. He smashed downward with his Colts barrel, downward again and again. The man's fall was preceded by the thump of his pistol on the floor.

A fix! Steve thought swiftly. Frisk's fix! He'll be comin' to sweep up the pieces. Let's see, now—

He found the dropped gun, reholstered his own, rammed the other one into his waistband. He picked up the man and almost trotted out of the office and around the building to the corral. He clucked softly to himself, for another horse, saddled, was now in the corral beside the palomino. He put the limp body across the saddle and secured it with quick turns of the man's lariat. Then he took the horse's reins and swung up on the palomino.

He rode softly out of town and into the mesquite growth. He tied the man securely to a thick bush, gagged him with the tail of his own shirt, hobbled the horse, and rode back to town. Hitching the palomino behind a house fifty yards from the sheriff's office, he moved carefully and quietly up toward the courthouse.

There were men standing in the darkness beside the building. Low voices carried to Steve as he worked

toward the men.

"So I reckon she's all right," Frisk Ranier was saying confidently. "Jerry likely carted him off to hide some'r's. You think everybody believed you, Red, about droppin' your gun an' it goin' off?"

"Shore they did!" Zeke Ranier snarled. "Time to git goin'. We don't want to give Leemans time to finish countin' an' lock up. That damn express safe's like to be grief enough."

They moved off. Steve stood staring after them, then whirled and went at a dogtrot along the backs of the buildings that fronted this side of the main street. He came to the back door of the doctor's house and rapped upon it. Presently the doctor spoke through it. Steve gave his name.

"Doc, if you'd like some practice with that Greener, slip a dozen buckshot shells into your pockets an' come on out. The fun'll be at Leemans's!"

"I'm ahead of you!" Higgins cried. In rather less than two minutes he was out with Steve, the shotgun over his arm.

They went quietly toward Leemans's store. Steve whispered to Higgins, who stopped, flattening himself against the wall. Steve went on, putting down each foot cautiously. Inch by inch, almost, he came to the door of the store. He heard someone breathing in the doorway-embasure. He stiffened, breathing silently himself. The Colt lifted in his right hand. He leaned forward.

Scientifically, he swung the long barrel when he had located the sentry's head, then stepped forward and caught the man's slumping body under the arms. He stood still, holding it up and listening. From within the store, somewhere out of sight, came a sudden drone of voices. He stepped backward,

moving slowly, supporting the limp weight.

When he was ten feet back, he set the body down. Higgins came to him. Steve brought out a pair of handcuffs and gave them to the doctor.

"Take this hairpin somewhere you can cuff his hands behind him around somethin'. Then go to the front door an' rattle it an' call out. I'll be inside, lookin' things over."

He went back as Higgins picked up the senseless lookout and turned away. He went into the door and worked toward Leemans's office. Before he reached it he could see Red, the cowboy, and another man whom he didn't know, standing outside of the office door. Light came from inside, to shine on their faces. Odd, he thought, that neither of these was masked. Leemans knew Red, certainly.

He moved closer. An unfamiliar voice was talking.

"So that's all you can rake up, huh? Less'n three thousand! Leemans, you're a double-damn liar. You got the roll for half the cowmen an' saloon-keepers in this neck o' the woods. Talk up, or we'll roast your feet! Where you got the real money hid?"

From the front corner of the store where was housed the express office two men came. Steve could not see their faces. But nearing the door of Leemans's office, they spoke.

"We better take that damn safe out into the mesquite an' blow her," Zeke Ranier said.

"Hell!" This from Frisk Ranier. "We could easy hide her a long way off. Blow her any time. Don't need to bother about tonight. I'll git the hawsses."

"I tell you"—this was Leemans's desperate voice from within—"that's

every last cent that's in the place, Snake! Every last cent. Sometimes they's more, but now—"

There came to Steve the flat sound of a blow, then the level, almost toneless voice that had threatened the storekeeper.

"Curt, you bring that lamp off the wall. Set her on the floor. Ram somethin' in his mouth so he can't howl. Go on an' git the hawsses, Frisk. You an' Zeke snake that safe out an' hide her in the brush. Then cover up the tracks. Me an' Curt'll be plenty to handle this illegitimate. We'll roast his feet."

Steve scowled uncertainly. The Raniers were beginning to move toward him. Then from the front door came a rattle of handle and latch and a yelling voice, demanding Leemans.

"Slide around!" the grim voice barked. "See who that damn fool is. Bend a gun barrel over his knot—hightail!"

"Stick 'em up!" Steve yelled. "Stick 'em up! You're surrounded!"

Then several things happened in a twinkling. The light went out in the office. From the windows in front filtered a pallid glow of street light. Figures moving hurriedly were silhouettes in the passage between the counters of the store. Steve squatted. Then the floor in front of the office door breathed flame. He heard lead singing with the roar of the guns.

He had the advantage of them. He was low; he could shape them in that dimness. He fired steadily, if half-blindedly as to actual targets—right-hand Colt, left-hand Colt. And there was the boom of a shotgun from far up at the front: Higgins was unlimbering there. Another boom—that would be the other barrel.

But they were running at Steve now. He fired as rapidly as he could snap back the big hammers and let them drop. A man fell across him, groaning. Steve, gun empty, snatched; his hand touched the metal of a carbine. He jerked at it, got it, straightened, and ran backward toward the door. Someone cannoned into him, swore, and recoiled. He rammed the carbine muzzle out, felt it prod flesh, cocked it and pressed trigger, then ran on.

He stood outside of the back door, carbine up. Someone was yelling from the front. He made out his name, finally.

"I—we got 'em cut off back here!" he yelled in answer.

Men came running around the corner of the store. They called to him—called him "Marshal." He answered curtly, then sent a yell into the store.

"Somebody in there light a lamp! Game's up—we got you!"

There was no answer. One of the men behind Steve went down the line and came back with a lantern. When it was lighted Steve took it from his hands and bent, to set it inside the store.

Nothing happened. He slid in and to one side. Someone was groaning, up near the office.

"Leemans!" Steve called, stooping cautiously. "Leemans?"

"All right," the storekeeper answered. "I—I'm all right. Who's that? Tor-mey?"

"Light the lamp in there."

There was a fumbling noise, the scratch of a match; then out from the office door shone the light—upon a huddle of bodies.

Steve could see Red, sprawling halfway down the store's rear section, and, almost under his feet, the man who

had stood beside Red outside the door—Curt Whinright, it must be. Both were dead.

Steve went slowly up toward the office. Frisk Ranier and his father were lying there. They had virtually been shot to pieces; he saw evidence of many pistol and rifle slugs as well as shotgun charges. He looked in at Leemans, who sat at his desk with one hand feeling shakily of his blood-dabbled forehead. Then he poked on.

Snake Whinright had almost made the front of the store when a blast of gunfire from the broken windows had caught him.

Calling to those outside the store, Steve went back to Leemans. Presently the store was crowded. Steve listened to Leemans's tale of the holdup. He said that he had recognized every man.

"Funny they wasn't masked, knowin' you knowed 'em," a man commented slowly.

Steve laughed harshly. "Funny? It kinda gives the show away—them not bein' worried about his ever tellin' on 'em."

"Well, this'll shore ease the sherf's mind!" the man said, and laughed. "Somebody ought to go tell him."

"You ought to go, Steve," Higgins said solemnly.

Steve nodded blankly. He went out of the back door and down to the palomino. Mounting, he rode along the street.

At the sheriff's gate a white figure stood, bathed by the light of the slow-rising moon. She looked very slender.

"Mop-up," Steve told her quietly, swinging down. "Both the Whinrights, both the Raniers, that fool cowboy, Red. At Leemans's store. Reckon your dad'll want to know."

As he walked through the gate she

put a hand on his arm. He covered it with his hand, and they walked up to the veranda together.

Inside the sheriff's bedroom Steve looked at the sick man. Almost, his hard mouth curved at thought of Dr. Higgins's doing. But gravely enough, he told the story of the mop-up.

"The Raniers!" Plato Mahr said over and over. "I can't figger 'em! They been the biggest folks in the county so long. I knowed they wasn't havin' trouble with the Whinrights, ever, but—An' they're both gone! Well, son, looks like the county owes you plenty! Hadn't been for you comin' in, they'd have got poor Leemans, an' likely me, too."

Steve looked at Lucille, whistled soundlessly, moved a little, and dropped his hand. It caught hers. She began to pull it away but he held onto it and she relaxed, though the color came

flooding to her face.

"I'd like to stay in the county," Steve said thoughtfully. "If you'd like to give me a chief deputy's star, I certainly *would* like to settle down in Palogrande."

"Course you can have the star," Mahr said with the most decided tone Steve had yet heard from him. "But shucks alive! Man like you, seems to me, would want to hit the Rangers."

"Nah, I don't want to go Rangerin'," Steve said. "Just finished up seven year in 'em, you see. Quit sergeant, last month, after havin' about a peck o' lead shot at me. I was actin' cap'n of Y Company for a year. Now I want to quit raisin' hell. I'd rather settle down an' raise roses, an' onions, an—"

He looked at Lucille again and she smiled encouragingly.

"An'—well, other things you grow around homes," he grinned. THE END

Broomtail Rancher

BACK in the days when Tap Duncan was running the Walking X iron on more cows than there were in Arizona, a cowboy of his acquaintance took up horse raising in the Hualapai Mountains. His unpopularity with the cowmen who ran on the same open range wasn't due to his personal peculiarities or to his fondness for other people's beef—a fondness which, after all, he but shared with every other man in the Territory. Horses on cow range are anathema, particularly in dry years. Still, they got along, did the horse man and the cowmen who were his neighbors—neighbors, that is, in the sense that they might be found forty miles from a given point when the sign was right.

One such neighbor, cowman by trade, rode up to the horse camp about dark one day and was greeted with: "Light and eat—got some fresh beef in camp."

"Whose is it this time?" asked the cowman, who knew the customs of the country.

The man frying steaks in the dutch oven grinned across the fire. "It's another of Old Man Cunningham's, and I'm right embarrassed about it too. I been eatin' 'Gene's beef all year, keepin' tally on the wagon tongue so's I could tell him if he ever asked. But, d'you know, a couple of saddle tramps rode by the other day and I made 'em free of the camp whilst I was ridin'—and danged if those lazy scamps didn't burn up that wagon tongue for firewood!"

—W. H. HUTCHINSON

A WESTERN CROSSWORD PUZZLE

By Ruth Nalls

Across

1. Rancher's "trademark"
6. Cayuse
11. Deep canyon
16. One who loads
17. Pungent vegetable
18. Unit of weight
19. Join
20. Mountain lions
21. Western pants
22. Self
23. Friends (Fr.)
25. _____lers, cattle thieves
27. Man's name
28. Puts on anew
30. Stead
31. Beers
32. Common nickname for a cowboy
33. Triumphed
34. Nothing
36. Carried
39. Tropical fruit
41. _____r, range squatter
45. Mine products
46. "Ding _____ Bell"
47. Cattleman
49. No (slang)
50. Western cemeteries
52. Wyatt _____p, famous Western lawman
53. Fawned (upon)
55. Ancient Greek coin
56. Spanish dollar
57. Attack
58. Paper money
60. Idler
61. _____ Mexico
63. S_____ of the Pioneers (radio)
64. Vehicle
65. Author of many Western books
68. Mlsjudges
70. Cowboy novel or movie
74. Hold up

Across

75. Successor
76. Rave
77. _____ Grande river
78. Southwest building material
80. Crane
82. Famous San Antonio fort
84. Spanish Mr.
85. Grassy space in a forest
86. Legal papers
87. Kind of beans
88. Chemical compound
89. Gander's mate

Down

1. More despondent
2. Where deer and antelope play
3. Good-by (Sp.)
4. Clear profit
5. Envisioned
6. Arizona Indians
7. Burden
8. Edge of canyon
9. Flying high
10. Follow
11. Cowboy's shootin' iron
12. Color
13. Blacksmith's block
14. _____ facias, judicial writ
15. Flat-topped hills
24. Southwestern neighbor (abbr.)
26. Sol
29. Western Indians
30. Almost extinct breed of cattle
31. Man's name
33. Desire
35. Taverns
36. "Under the _____ Rim," by Zane Grey
37. Equatorial constellation
38. Lone Star State
39. Dispositions
40. Lowest deck on a ship

Down

42. Old cattleman's pet peeve
43. Pester
44. Mistake
46. Mamma deer
48. Every
50. Nip
51. Wading bird
54. Say it isn't so
56. Part of a fence
59. Animal enclosures
60. Untamed horse
62. Tiny
64. Man's name

Down

65. Pasturage
66. Western show
67. Black
69. Crest of a hill
70. Range wars were fought over it
71. Muse of love poetry
72. Covers with hoarfrost
73. Rope loop
75. Feminine pronoun
76. Go horseback
79. Large snake
81. Large tub
83. Card game



WHEN a man's been branded "plumb worthless" by his sweetheart's dad, he'll likely try to do something about it. "Angel" Patmore does—with a vengeance!



Dollars to Clink

By Bertrand W. Sinclair

MAYBE that was foolsh of me," Angelo Patmore murmured. "Still, I don't know. Darn the luck anyway!"

He stood at the bottom of three steps that lifted to a broad veranda running like a gallery around three sides of a rambling house. Angel had a narrow pink strip of paper that he turned absently in thin, sinewy fingers as he took that last look. He did not need to see through the door to get the picture.

He could visualize a middle-aged man six inches taller than himself and fifty pounds heavier, striding up and down the room uttering blasphemous words. There was a girl sitting on a couch with tears in her eyes and a mixture of fear and anger on a face that was almost plain until she smiled

—when it seemed that her features grew illumined by some inner radlance that always went straight to Angel's heart.

Angel stood for perhaps ten seconds in the warmth of a spring noon. The Trinity River flowed like molten silver a stone's throw on his right. He had come galloping down the Trinity bottoms since sunrise that morning, after a hectic night in a little cow town forty miles west. Now he shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

Half an hour later he was jogging east toward Post Oak, mounted on a fresh horse, leading a fat seal-brown pack pony with his bed, his warbag, all his few belongings lashed across a sawbuck saddle.

Halfway to Post Oak a rider loped

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out of a hollow. They met on a rutted wagon trail.

"'Lo, Steve."

Steve only stared. He loomed like a giant on a mount smaller than either of Angel's horses. He was a very tall man with wide, square shoulders topped off by a face like a good-natured eagle's.

"Mounted an' packed on your own private stock, eh?" said Steve at last. "What's broke loose, Angeleno?"

"Goin' to Post Oak to cash a check and head north," Angel replied. "Or east or west or south or someplace."

"Yeah—but—" Steve Murray spluttered.

"We had words," Angel explained.

"You've had words before," Steve reminded.

"He lit on me spurrin' an' whippin' before Grace," Angel continued. "I couldn't stand it. I wasn't feelin' too good this mornin'. Dropped my bankroll in a big game in San Marco last night. He blew hell outa me. Darn it, it wasn't his money."

Murray snorted. "He dug into you, eh?" he said. "Then what?"

"I lammed him," Angel said quite casually. "Pasted him a couple times, good."

"My Lord," Steve breathed. "An' you live to tell the tale?"

"I took his gun away from him. Had to. He'd 'a' plunked me."

Steve gazed at Angel with mingled incredulity, amazement, and admiration. "You're plumb crazy," he said. "Just like dynamite. You shouldn't 'a' took the Old Man serious. Gosh, you're the youngest man that ever ran a roundup on the Trinity. He didn't mean it, Angel."

"You bet he meant it," Angel declared. "You should 'a' heard him.

Plumb worthless. A ridin', shootin', gamblin' fool. Never have two silver dollars to clink together at the same time. I'll show him!"

Angel's repressed feeling broke loose. He swore in a mixture of Spanish and English, until he shocked even Steve Murray, who had listened to Angel Patmore curse bad horses, Texas Northers, his luck at poker, and various other exasperations over a three-year period.

"How?"

Angel understood the monosyllabic query. "Don't know yet," he said more calmly, looking aside at the Trinity rippling and flashing on its way to the Gulf. "Lotsa ways. But I expect I got to get outa this country to do it. He won't overlook me makin' a monkey of him."

"What she think about it?" Steve inquired.

"Nobody ever knows what a woman's thinkin'," Angel observed sagely. "She says she'll wait for me to deliver the goods."

"I'll be best man at the weddin'," Steve offered.

"Sure." Angel smiled. "Well, I'll ramble."

"I've a darned good mind to go with you," Steve muttered disconsolately.

"Don't be a darned fool, old-timer," Angel advised. "I'm barred, tabooed, blacklisted as far as the LUK is concerned. Luke'll be inclined to make you range boss now I'm out. Stay with him."

"You reckon he might?" Steve asked hopefully.

"Sure. Why not?"

They shook hands and parted. Presently Angel rode into Post Oak. April in that latitude shed a beneficent warmth. Roundup season was at hand.

Trall herds were organizing for departure. Post Oak's dusty street was full of saddled horses. Beyond the rim of the valley in which the Trinity flowed a dozen herds were marshaling or taking their leave for the far, mysterious Northwest. Hunters were killing the last of the buffalo up there. U. S. cavalry ran down hostile redskins, herding them back on reservations. An unmeasured empire of virgin grass and water beckoned to southern cowmen from the ranges where the longhorns crowded each other for room.

The greatest pastoral movement in the history of the world waxed to its zenith when Angel Patmore rode into that little Texas town. And for a foundation to a desire newborn in his breast Angel had two good horses, his riding-gear, blankets, a Colt on his hip, and a Winchester carbine under his left stirrup leather—and a check for one hundred dollars.

That pink slip took him back to the curse Luke Karsten laid on him. He dismounted. A gambling, riding fool who would never have two silver dollars to clink together! He shoved it back in his pocket and walked into Morrow's saloon. Angel thought he needed a drink.

But he did not take a drink. The bartender leaned on his polished counter watching five men at a green-topped table. Half a dozen other men stood about watching the players. Angel looked awhile. His fingers itched. No matter that he had dropped twelve hundred dollars—a year's pay for a Texas roundup boss—in San Marco the night before. No matter that he knew in his soul that poker was like a fever in his blood. He looked at this game with eager eyes. Three cattlemen and two punchers. They were dealing

and betting silently. Angel estimated the size of the game. At least two thousand dollars variously stacked before the five. If a man could clean that game! And Angel had cleaned many a poker game—as well as having himself gone to the cleaners in others.

He walked out, along the street to the Post Oak County Bank.

A tall, thin-faced, dark man in the middle of the open floor space flanked by a teller's and cashier's grilled cage glared and stormed. Colonel John Hyams stood behind the counter with his hands on the mahogany surface. The colonel's genial old face wore a mixture of annoyance and apprehension. Colonel John was, strictly speaking, the Post Oak County Bank—an institution in person as well as financially. He had been casting funds on the limited waters and boundless plains of the Post Oak country for two decades and watching it come back to him manifold, with the good will of every cattleman he dealt with.

But there was no atmosphere of good will in that room when Angel Patmore stepped through the doorway. He knew the tall, dark-visaged man. He knew blind fury when he saw it written on the human countenance. And he knew Colonel John for a kindly, upright soul who would rather help than harm any man.

So Angel's eyes dwelt curiously on Jack Ratsey's right arm and hand after one glance at his flaming face. He had seen men in that same tense-armed posture before, oblivious to everything except a venomous passion to destroy.

Hence Angel was quite prepared for what was an instinctive reaction on his own part. He knew that Ratsey was getting ready to go for his gun. He did

not know what it was all about. He did not care. To Angel it was sheer murder, no matter what provocation, what grievance had worked Ratsey up to the killing pitch.

Thus, when the curving fingers closed on the grip of the .45 with an upward swoop, Angel, whose muscular motions were as lightning-quick as his agile brain, was drawing also.

And only one shot cracked in that room with a flash and a roar magnified by the enclosing walls. Ratsey stood gripping his right hand with his left. His gun fell with a clatter halfway across the house of money.

"That'll be enough from you, Mister Jack Ratsey," Angel said. "And you two—" He frowned at a cashier and a ledger clerk who had each pulled a gun. "'Tend to your pencil-pushin'. You were both a mile behind, anyway."

Ratsey's mouth opened in a snarl. He rubbed at his numbed hand. He glared at Angel, at Colonel John. His fingers had only suffered from shock. He gave that hand a last tentative shake and stooped for his gun. With that retrieved he bent burning eyes on Angel Patmore, slim, small, watchful, unsmiling. Angel looked like a school-boy in riding-boots and Stetson—but Ratsey knew better than that.

"You can go as far as you like, Jack," Angel said softly. "But what's the use of bein' a damn' fool twice in one day?"

"I'll see you later," Ratsey muttered. "Both of you."

"I'll always see you first," Angel replied.

The man went out, head down, muttering to himself. Colonel John looked across the counter and sighed.

"That was right smart of you, Angelo," he said. "You certainly kept me from bein' meat for the undertaker."

"Maybe he was just aimin' to run a bluff of some kind," Angel suggested.

"No—" Colonel John shook his head — "he'd gone loco. I know killin' when I see it in a man's eye."

"Lucky I happened in to cash a check then," Angel said. "Still, 'twasn't nothin' a-tall."

"Give your check to Smith." The colonel indicated the cashier. "Come back into my office and have a drink."

Colonel John's hand shook as he poured two drinks from a decanter.

"Ratsey was terrible worked up," he explained. "He's spread himself over a lot of territory. Shootin' at a fortune. Stands to lose it all if he don't raise a hundred thousand to carry him over till fall. I never did consider him a good risk. Too much temper and not enough judgment. I just wouldn't let him have any part of that sum. He lost his head."

"He's sure a darned poor specimen." Angel frowned. "Pullin' his gun on a unarmed man. Everybody in Texas knows you never packed a pistol in your life. Yes, I think he was fixin' to kill you. He shore looked wall-eyed."

"I know he was," Colonel John admitted. "And now, darn it, he'll probably try to kill you on sight. I'm worried about that, Angel. It isn't your war."

"Don't worry." Angel shrugged his shoulders.

"You're bound to meet, operatin' here in the same territory," old Hyams rumbled.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Angel drawled. "I won't be lingerin' long in these parts."

"Oh? How come?"

"Me'n' Luke's parted." Angel explained, a little sadly. "And we parted angry. I ain't nothin' but a gamblin'

an' ridin' fool, Colonel John. I've run through twenty thousand dollars since I come of age. Two years. And we locked horns finally today, over Grace. He says he'd sooner see her in her grave than married to a plumb no-account like me. Says I'll never have two silver dollars to clink together."

He repeated more of old Luke Karsten's scathing phrases that burned him, for all his nonchalance.

"You been a darned good roundup boss for him three years now," Colonel John reflected. "Luke Karsten never had a no-account that long on his payroll."

"I manhandled him a trifle too," Angel confessed. "He's foam'n' at the mouth yet, I expect. Now Mister Jack Ratsey has a grievance against me too. I'm not goin' to be popular around these parts. Thanks."

This last to the cashier who laid five twenty-dollar gold pieces before him. Angel rose.

"So long, Colonel John," he said. "Before sundown, I'll be travelin'."

"Listen, boy—" the colonel pulled at his white mustache, towering a head over Angel. "What do you aim to do?"

"Go north to a new country and make a stake," Angel voiced his resolve. "This is the last money I got, all I got. I been a poker-playin' fool. You know what I'm goin' to do with this hundred? There's a good liberal game goin' in Bill Morrow's place. I'm goin' to clean it or be cleaned."

Colonel John nodded comprehension. "If I don't see you again, Angelo," he said, after a little pause, "remember this. You done me a good turn a few minutes ago. If you got any ambition I could help you gratify, I'd stretch a point."

"A man's got to gratify his own am-

bitions," Angel said slowly. "He ain't much good if he needs a wet nurse."

Colonel John grinned and stuck out his hand. "Well, you remember what I said," he concluded. "If you ever have to holler for anything you think of John Hyams in Post Oak, Texas. I've known wild, gamblin' rip-roarin' kids that was pretty good men in a plnch. You do know the cow business, Angel. Stay with that and you'll wear diamonds."

Angel went a trifle warily down the street to Morrow's. Post Oak, since he shot that gun out of Ratsey's hand, held immediate danger for him. If old Luke Karsten should get to brooding over the indignity Angel had visited on him that morning he might come ridin' in also. There was a matter between them that Angel hated to think about. Not that Angel worried as he made his way to that poker game. Only being, for all his years and his boyish smallness, potentially deadly in a private war, he preferred peace. In any case, regardless of enemies and gunpowder lightning, pride would not have him dodge out of Post Oak until he chose to go. Meantime, that poker game lured him. The time to gamble, he told himself, was when a man had nothing to lose. Possessing resources, it was better to be conservative. So—

Angel joined the watching crowd, with his back to the wall just in case Ratsey came looking for trouble. Card sense told him in five minutes that one cowpuncher in that game was outclassed. Angel's hunch was right. Within twenty minutes there was a vacant chair. He slipped into it and slid his five twenties across to the man banking the game. Small capital. Starting on a shoestring, Angel reflected. He could go broke in one hand.

A fool for luck, he said to himself within ten minutes. The first hole card dealt him was a king. The second a king. Kings back to back in a Texas stud game. Angel wore his poker face and bet his hand like a drunken sailor. He tapped himself when the last card fell.

"Angeleno, you always were hell to bluff with high cards in sight," one cowman said, and called the bet.

Angel more than doubled his money on that first play. On his own deal he got every chip before him in the pot and was called in two places. He could not go wrong. A queer glow began to light him up inside. He was six hundred strong now. And he could not be sitting in a better game.

Homer Stultz across the table had forty thousand cattle, owned half a county. Stultz loved stud poker, for itself. Money was nothing to him. Paul Stratton had three trail herds bound north. Stratton had once bet a trail herd on the last card to his hand in a stud game at Abilene.

At the end of an hour's play Angel Patmore had half the chips on the table piled under his chin. Paul Stratton was signing IOU's. Stultz humped in his chair. This was the sort of game he liked. He was winning. So was Angel. The other three were outclassed or outlucked.

And in the middle of a hand Jack Ratsey clanked in from the rear. Absorbed in the game, Angel was not aware of him until he saw Ratsey's mean eyes bent on him over a player's shoulder. Ratsey did not say anything. His look was enough. Angel knew the signs. It annoyed him. But there was nothing he could do now. He did know that something was going to be forced—because Ratsey stood waiting until

the remaining cowpuncher decided it was too stiff a game for him and cashed what chips he had left. Ratsey took his chair. And Ratsey was a notoriously poor stud player. He seldom played, and never in that stiff a game. The ante was ten dollars now, and the sky the limit. Angel knew that Ratsey was getting in that game to ride him, to start something.

It came before long. Angel had the deal. Ratsey sat on his right. Angel had raised him out of a pot by sheer weight of money the hand before. It was Ratsey's cut now. When Angel picked up the deck to deal Ratsey snarled—

"Set them cards down, you pie-faced rat!"

Angel looked at him. "Don't call names, Ratsey," he murmured. "I'll ram 'em down your throat if you do."

"You slipped that cut," Ratsey growled. "I seen you."

"If you're lookin' for trouble," Angel replied deliberately, "it ain't necessary to have an excuse. Nor is it necessary to break up this game. Have some sense."

For answer Ratsey slapped him across the mouth. Paul Stratton clamped him with one powerful arm and stopped his draw. Angel sat, white-faced, shaking, with sheer anger at the stupid vindictiveness of the man. Then he got up.

"Let him go," he said.

"No," both Stratton and Stultz declared. "It's a good game, and no damn' fool like him is goin' to break it up that way. Get to hell outa this saloon, Ratsey, and stay out till this stud game is ended. Then if you wanta shoot it out with this Patmore kid, go to it. It'll be your own funeral."

Ratsey tore himself loose, his face livid. "You blamed runt!" he shouted.

"If you're in Post Oak more'n another hour I'll drop you in your tracks."

They watched him out the door, and dealt again. No one commented on the incident. Angel shook it out of his mind. He would not get out of Post Oak without burning powder now. But it did not crimp his play. In another hour Stratton and the strange cowman grimaced uncomfortably and cashed in their few remaining chips. Stratton made out a check to bearer and gave it to Stultz, who was banker.

"We resign," he said. "You'n' Angelo are too many for us. Besides, I got business to attend to. Bet 'em high, boys, an' sleep in the street."

It narrowed to Angel and Stultz. They played four hands. Angel won three pots. Then he laid down his last hand.

"I don't like single-handed stud for one thing," he said. "For another, I got Ratsey on my mind. You're winner a little, Stultz. I'm winner a lot and it means something to me. Do you mind if we close the game?"

"Hell, no," Stultz grinned. "I'm just playin' for pastime."

Angel cashed in, filled his pockets with gold and silver and banknotes—to say nothing of Paul Stratton's check. He loosened his gun in its scabbard and turned to the door.

"Hey, kid!" Stultz's voice was like a hiss in his ear.

Angel whirled. Ratsey had come in from the rear. His gun was flashing to a level. Angel felt his hat whirl off his head.

If Ratsey's speed and accuracy had been equal to his ferocious intent Angel Patmore would have been an added unit to the small company on Post Oak's Boot Hill. He left Angel no choice. Being earnest in his desire to

live his allotted span, Angel did his best. Left to himself, he would no more have tried to kill Jack Ratsey than he had tried to kill him in Colonel John's bank. But this was a case of kill or be killed. And so it was Ratsey who went down in the bluish haze from two spitting guns.

Angel knew he would have a feud on his hands later. Ratsey had relatives. Right or wrong, any Texan's kin could be depended upon for reprisal. So Angel, standing gun in hand, resentfully concluded that the climax had been reached and his immediate exit from Post Oak ordered both by destiny and prudence.

So he hurried to the livery stable, repacked, and saddled.

"Well," he said to himself, "If I head north and keep going I'll live longer."

Abreast of the County Bank he halted. An impulse partly born of Luke Karsten's contemptuous summary of his nature and deeds, and partly from that poker fund heavy in his pocket, gave birth in his brain to an idea. He strode through the doorway. Colonel John peered cautiously from his private office, and came out to meet Angel.

"I got Ratsey," Angel explained. "He jumped me roughshod. All I could do was defend myself. So I'm splittin' the breeze for foreign parts."

"Stand pat," Colonel John advised. "Stand your trial. You'll come clear."

"Only mean more gunplay later," Angel said. "I know the Ratsey tribe. No, I'm on my way. I was goin' anyhow. I beat that poker game, Colonel John. Bank my money for me, will you."

"H-m." Colonel Hyams grunted as Angel disgorged his winnings. "You sure did."

"Six thousand, three hundred and thirty," Angel finished counting. "I'll take the three hundred and thirty with me. I'm a gamblin' fool, Colonel John. Luke was right."

"I wouldn't say a fool, son," the old man murmured.

"Fool or not," Angel said seriously, "I have played my last poker, touched my last card for money. That ain't a promise to nobody. It's a plain statement of fact. I'll show that old high-binder sittin' on the Trinity River I'm good for somethin' besides gamblin' and ridin'. 'Never have two silver dollars to clink together!' I'll show him. If I can see an openin' in the cow business somewhere, Colonel John, would you consider lendin' me as much capital as I got on deposit?"

"I have backed poorer risks in the cow business than you'll ever be, Angelo," Hyams said without hesitation. "You can draw on me through any bank."

"You sure mean that?" Angel asked a trifle incredulously.

Colonel John nodded.

"I'll remember that," Angel replied. "Maybe I'll call your bluff. I'm headed for Montana. But don't tell nobody where I'm gone. I don't want no more fire-eatin' Ratseys on my trail."

And he was gone with a deposit slip for six thousand dollars in his pocket, and the colonel's last shout was to the effect that it was no bluff.

In a month Angel was skirting the fringe of Colorado. On a fork of the Republican River he fell in with a trail herd—two thousand longhorns. Short-handed, with an unruly crew, a feeble, ineffectual trail boss welcomed Angel like a long-lost brother. He went to work as a hand. In a week he was

virtually in charge. By sheer energy and one brief display of force he whipped a dozen snarling, shirking, disgruntled riders into an orderly, efficient crew long before they turned the eastern fork of the Bighorns and marched down to the Yellowstone. Twelve hundred miles in an airline from Post Oak. Sixteen hundred as a herd traveled. A distance from his goal not to be measured in miles.

Sometimes Angel would look at the little picture of Grace Karsten he carried in his watch case. Then he would hear old Luke's contemptuous epithets. *Never have two silver dollars to clink together! Plumb worthless except to ride and shoot and play the fool! A man that had had a small fortune handed to him on his twenty-first birthday ought to have something and be somebody! Damned gamblin' pup!*

Angel's face would burn a little. Funny he had never thought of himself as being measured by what he had—by what he could acquire in material possessions. Where would he be any different if he had ten thousand cattle and a hundred thousand dollars in the bank? He would still be Angelo Patmore, no better, no worse.

Well, it was not that; Angel conceded so much to old Luke's estimate. It was a game. You beat it if you were up and coming. If you weren't—

"Gosh, she's a big country," Angel would say then, staring over a thousand square miles of unfenced pasture from a little rise on the rolling plains.

Not a rider in sight. Not a house. No life but wolf and jack rabbit and bands of antelope. The buffalo were gone and the longhorns were moving in. Empty from dawn to sundown for a hundred miles in every direction. Twinges of homesickness would seize him. Then

he would square his shoulders.

When the herd rose dripping out of the Yellowstone within sight of Miles City the little, fussy trail boss rode for town. He did not come back that night. Angel grazed the herd ten miles north to a night camp. In the morning he galloped into Miles. Found his boss in a hotel room with a broken leg. His horse had fallen on him. A military surgeon had set the fracture.

"I'm here for two months, darn the luck," the trail boss complained. "You take the herd on, Angelo. You been same as runnin' the layout anyway. I'd never 'a' got that herd this far with that crew. I was expectin' to meet Sleeman here, but he ain't showed up. Cross the Missouri at Fort Benton an' get further orders there. So long."

Angel was two days north of Miles when a big, red-faced man rode into his noon camp and handed him a note. It ran:

This here is George Sleeman of Fort Worth. He owns this herd of XP two-year-olds you're handling.

Yours truly,

—D. Ayres

"Well," Angel said, "there they are in good flesh an' movin' north. Mr. Sleeman, what's your pleasure?"

"There's darned little pleasure for me in the cow business these days," Sleeman said morosely. "I just come out to see if you was any improvement on that poor stick that's layin' in Miles with a busted leg."

Angel said nothing to that. He knew men and their moods. He perceived that Sleeman had something on his mind that did not sit well. It was not Angel's business to make talk—only to take orders.

"Who'd you ride for down south?" Sleeman asked abruptly.

"I'd as soon not tell you," Angel said frankly. "I was forced to down a man, and I don't want his kinfolk gunnin' for me up here. But I was a roundup boss three years in Texas."

"If you was a range boss in Texas I reckon you can handle a trail herd for me?" Sleeman conceded.

"I can handle a trail herd for anybody," Angel replied coolly, "if they tell me what they want done an' leave me do it."

"Trail 'em to Fort Benton 'n' hold 'em around there till you hear from me; that's all. I got seven herds strung between Southern Wyoming an' the Missouri River right now. I'm cattle-poor and I kinda miscalculated the strength of my hand. I've got to try an' turn one of these herds into cash."

Angel watched a hundred sleek two-year-olds string past.

"I wouldn't mind ownin' this bunch myself," he said a bit wistfully. "You could keep the other six herds an' welcome."

"I'll sell 'em to you dirt-cheap." Sleeman bent an inquiring eye on him. "You got any money, kid?"

Now the conjunction of money and cattle revived in Angel's mind instantly the very look and tone of Colonel John Hyams. And Angel thought fast, letting his imagination play.

"I don't carry the price of two thousand cattle in my jeans," he said. "Maybe I could raise it in a few days. What'll you take for the outfit, herd, saddle stock, an' wagons?"

Sleeman chewed his under lip for a second. "For cash down I'll make you a gift," he said at last. "Twenty thousand dollars."

Nobody knew better than Angel Patmore just how much of a gift those two thousand XP's were at that price.

He sat a little straighter in his saddle.

"I'd have to go back to Miles with you where there's a telegraph line," he said. "I can raise that much, I think. Not sure, but I'll try."

"If you could raise twenty thousand cash to take this herd off my hands I'd pay your railroad fare to Texas an' back," Sleeman said feelingly. "I need hard cash, young feller, and I need it bad."

From Miles City Angel wired Colonel John Hyams briefly:

Can buy two thousand two-year-olds of George Sleeman at snap price. Unlimited range up here for taking. Need twenty thousand deposited in Miles City, Montana, bank to close deal. Give you note and mortgage on brand as security, or operate on shares if you like. Will wire details if interested.

—Angelo Patmore

Twelve hours. Twenty-four hours. Colonel John might be out of town. Maybe it was out of sight out of mind. And it was good business. The kind the Post Oak County Bank dealt in as a matter of course. Angel could see that investment doubled, perhaps trebled, in three years off that herd. But it was a long way to Post Oak. Angel went to bed the second night with gloom for company.

But as he sat eating breakfast the cashier of a newly opened bank in Miles City sought him out. "You Mr. Angelo Patmore?" he inquired.

Angel nodded.

"Expect any important communications from anybody, anywhere?" the man asked guardedly.

Angel looked at him a moment and took a chance. "I'm expectin' twenty thousand dollars to my credit from Colonel John Hyams of the Post Oak County Bank in Texas," he said calm-

ly. "Has she arrived?"

"She has arrove." The cashier smiled. "You can draw on us for twenty thousand. Providing you can identify yourself."

Angel could and did. He rode out of Miles that afternoon with a bill of sale in his pocket, the owner of two thousand mixed two-year-olds, a hundred saddle ponies, and a chuck wagon—and a cash balance of six thousand in Texas to run on.

"I'm in up to my neck," Angel said over and over. "It's sink or swim, because I've got the colonel's money runnin' on four legs. I got to make a go of this."

It was not so easy. Two men in the crew had been up the trail to Miles the previous season. None had ever been north of the Yellowstone. For three hundred miles Angel had to grope his way. He knew that Fort Benton lay on the Missouri River. Sleeman told him that north of Benton, especially along the Marias, unoccupied grazing land, well watered, spread for two hundred miles.

Free grass. Free land. Free water. No taxes. No wonder the Southwest was moving north. There was more gold in the grass roots, Angel knew, than the placer miners ever sluiced out of Last Chance and Virginia City. So he moved on with his herd, looking for a prime location.

When he swam them over the Big Muddy half a mile below Benton an elderly man sat his horse on the bank to watch the crossing. He nodded to Angel when that young man punched out the last of the drag.

"You're quite a kid to be runnin' a trail herd for Sleeman," he commented when he found out who was trail boss.

"Me?" Angel's amusement at the

tricks his boyish face and diminutive stature played on strangers rippled his face in a smile. "I'm runnin' this herd for myself."

"Sleeman's road brand," the stranger pointed out.

"Was," Angel corrected. "I bought this outfit off Sleeman at Miles."

"Oh!" The cowman grinned. "Time you're growed up you'll have plenty cattle."

"What I lack in size," Angel retorted, "I make up in speed. Ask them that know me."

"I will when I know who to ask about," the old man replied. "My name's Gray. I range the Diamond G on the Marias."

"Mine's Patmore," Angel returned. "And where I'll range this bunch I don't know yet."

"There's plenty of room on the Marias," Gray said genially. "Neighbors is darned scarce. Patmore, eh? You by any chance the kid that was range boss for Luke Karsten?"

"Yes," Angel admitted. "But I am not advertisin'. I was in a fuss on the Trinity before I left. There's folks would camp on my trail, maybe, with their guns out."

"I know," Gray nodded. "The Ratsey family is clannish. I knowed you right off. Happens I was in Post Oak that day. Started two trail herds south from there. I watched that poker game awhile. Won't advertise you, kid. Old Luke talked to me about you, after that."

"He would." Angel's bitterness was not so keen, but it still lingered. "I know about what he'd say. Plumb worthless. Never have two dollars to clink together."

Gray looked him over thoroughly before he replied. "You got two thousand

head of eattle, accordin' to your own say-so," he observed.

"I'll have more by'n' by," Angel frowned. "I'll show that old Trinity River hardshell a man don't have to grow a beard an' look sour to make money in the cow business."

Gray laughed. "Well, don't forget the Diamond G ranch at Boulder Crossing," he said. "It's a lonesome country. A neighbor or two would be welcome."

Angel did not forget. He loaded fresh supplies in Fort Benton, crossed the Teton, drew north to the Marias with the hump of the Goosebill a landmark on the western sky line, and threw his herd in on a broad river bottom when the first nip of autumn frosts was in the air of nights.

No surveyor had as yet squinted through a transit in that region. It was public domain, free for the taking. Angel rode miles up and down the Marias, picked a spot where crooked-limbed cottonwoods and compact groves of poplar gave him both shade and building material—hard by a natural meadow where with a mower and rake, he slashed down and stacked a hundred tons of hay while the rest of his crew labored with ax and hammer and saw. In an incredibly short time he had a house of sorts, a stable, a set of corrals created by that magic which the frontiersman carries in his hands and brain.

Then with no more to do, for his cattle must care for themselves till spring, he paid off his Texan crew, gave them railroad fare home and let them go when they began to shiver in the first winter winds. Two men elect to stay. The others were siek for the south and departed gladly. After which Angel sat down to compose a letter to Colonel John Hyams.

Any time you want your money out of this stock proposition, let me know. I can turn 'em over at a profit anytime. Unless a hard winter hits me, I aim very soon to get myself crowned as a cattle king. This is one grand cow country. I had an idea it was like the North Pole, but barring colder winters it's got Texas backed off the map for grass, water and timber. . . .

And a great deal more, because Angel was truly in love with Montana. When he wrote to Grace Karsten he talked more of himself and less of the country. He told her that if his mind and body were in Montana, his heart was still on the Trinity River.

Having dispatched those letters, Angel somehow felt blue and forlorn. The Marias seemed suddenly a most God-forsaken wilderness, in which he was doomed to struggle with bad weather, straying cattle, all the contingencies of a desperate undertaking, merely to prove to himself and a stubborn old fool in Texas that he was a man and not a wayward child.

So Angel saddled his best horse and went visiting.

He was used to women. There were sisters in his family. Also there was Grace Karsten. So that Angel was pleased and surprised, rather than embarrassed, to find every man of the Diamond G absent, except the cook, and a slim, imperious-looking wisp of a girl asking him to stable his horse and make himself at home after the custom of the cow country.

"You're Angelo Patmore, aren't you?" She sat across the table whereon she had placed beefsteak and cornbread and coffee hot from the cook's range. "I'm Molly Gray."

"Why, yes, that's me," Angel replied. "You're a good guesser."

"I saw the brand on your horse," said Molly. "Besides, Grace Karsten told me quite a lot about you in Fort Worth just after you quit the LUK."

"I didn't quit," Angel corrected. "Luke fired me."

"Well, you quit the country," Molly returned. "Like a fool."

"Like a no-account fool," Angel intoned. He had the impression that Molly Gray did not know about his run-in with Jack Ratsey, or she would not have said that. "That's what old Luke said I was. He'd be glad to know somebody agrees with him. I don't."

Molly cupped her hands over her chin and stared at him. She had dark-gray eyes and black hair and a mouth like a slash of carmine.

"Come to think of it, now that I see you personally, perhaps Grace was the fool," she said, after a minute's contemplation that almost made Angel uncomfortable.

But she did not say why. And Angel deftly changed the subject. But he wondered what the devil she meant, just the same.

At dusk Gray came in with half a dozen riders. They yarned around the fireplace till midnight. When Angel left next day Molly said to him, "Don't forget where we live."

Nor did Angel forget. His horse's hoofs made many a track to the Diamond G through the snows of that winter. Going and coming, he would turn aside here and there to look at little bunches of XP cattle making shift against the wolf and the blizzard, nosing for grass in loose snow, wild cattle in a wild country.

"A gamblin' fool," he said once scornfully. "Why, every cowman from here to the Rio Grande is gamblin' from season to season on weather and

water and grass. The winds and the rains can make him or break him. What's the difference between cattle and cards?"

And once he snapped the case of his watch to look at Grace Karsten's face.

"No, old girl, I'm not forgettin'," he muttered to himself.

Spring brought blue windflowers and green grass and the muster of roundup. Angel joined forces with the Diamond G. Gray led his roundup crew for a month. He had fifteen thousand cattle north of the Big Muddy; as many more in the south. He was past sixty and weary of saddle work. He said to Angel Patmore:

"You're younger and swifter than I am. Run this outfit for me."

And Angel ran it at a bank manager's salary and took care of his own stock besides. That season and the next.

When beef gathering closed at the end of the third summer and the last returns came in from the Chicago dealers Angel took stock. His original herd had been made up of one thousand two-year-old steers, one thousand heifers. His thousand heifers had bred so that he now owned twenty-six hundred head of stock cattle. His thousand steers, less a few winter-killed, had netted him thirty-five thousand dollars in the market. He could repay Colonel John Hyams with interest at seven per cent, and still have a comfortable balance in the bank, and more cattle under his individual brand than he started with.

"Luke Karsten said I would be no-account," he told Molly Gray. "Never would have two silver dollars to clink together. Well, I've proved him plumb mistaken. I'm goin' south and make the old hombre eat crow."

"There'll be a lot of satisfaction in that, I suppose," she said gravely.

"Satisfaction? Say, what you think I've sweated in summer and froze my fingers and checks in winter in this darned north-pole country for?" Angel demanded. "For the fun of the thing? I know pleasanter countries to make a livin' in. I was raised in Texas. I'm goin' back."

"To stay?" Molly asked.

"Well, that depends," Angel said thoughtfully. "I got a good start here. I wouldn't like to close out. I guess I'll be back in the spring."

"Don't go, Angel," Molly said slowly. "I was in Fort Worth last winter—in Post Oak, too. Jack Ratsey has two brothers there. They have made their talk. They haven't forgotten that killing."

"I got to go," Angel murmured. "I promised."

"You've been up here three years," Molly told him. "It won't be the same. A woman isn't like a tree. You don't plant her and go back long after to find her with her roots in the same spot."

Angel's cattle were bunched pretty close around his own ranch. His original meadow had grown to several hundred acres of irrigated hayland. He had five hundred tons of winter feed stacked for a hard-weather emergency. He had four riders hand-picked for the job. There was nothing to hold him.

Eventually he landed in San Marco, the nearest point to the Trinity he could reach by train. From there he headed for the LUK and Post Oak very much as he had left it, on the back of a horse. In San Marco he met men he knew, riders with whom he had work-

ed the range. They passed him without recognition.

"What's the matter with me?" Angel asked himself fretfully. "Folks don't know me any more."

Angel pondered as he rode down into the Trinity Valley. Of course people changed. He could feel change in himself. But not in most things. Tenaciously he had clung to a determination to show Luke Karsten that he could laugh lightly, ride like a fool, and still be a man in a man's world. The invisible thread that linked him to Grace was like a chain for strength—had been for three years. Only for that—Molly Gray—he recalled her last words. A man could interpret them in various ways. Angel thrust that out of his mind. The feeling that he was about to prove himself set his shoulders back and his head up as he rode into the LUK dooryard.

Change here. Yes. Angel's keen eyes noted sagging barn doors and broken fence panels. The LUK sat on a bald flat. The dry fall wind blew Texas dust in little swirls from under his horse's feet. The Trinity looked gray, shrunken, where he remembered it as sparkling like molten silver. A man, a tall, thin-faced man with a face like a good-natured eagle stood in the door of a bunkhouse—Steve Murray. He said:

"Howdy stranger. Put up your horse. It's high noon."

Steve did not know him. Something in Angel tightened up.

"Luke Karsten home?" he asked.

"Yeah, over in the house."

"Gosh," Angel breathed, and rode the fifty yards to the old ranch house.

He swung down by the same three steps. He doffed his hat in the doorway. Old Luke stood with his back to the fireplace where a yellow flame

flickered in a sooty cavern. The old man's bearded chin was sunk on his broad chest.

"Hello, Luke," Angel greeted.

"I dunno's I can place you." Karsten stared at him a few seconds. "You look familiar, too."

"Lord, Lord!" Angel cried. "Have I slipped a few years like Rip Van Winkle? I'm Angel Patmore, Luke."

Karsten walked around him into a better light. "Why, so it is," he said. "Darned if it ain't."

"Last time you and me talked, right here in this room," Angel reminded, "you give me hell, Luke. You said I was nothin' but a gamblin' fool. That I'd never have two silver dollars to clink together. And I told you I'd show you."

"I remember." Old Luke nodded.

"You still sore at me because I got mad an' tore into you?" Angel asked diffidently.

Karsten shook his head. A ghost of a smile flitted across his face.

"Well, I'm back." Angel issued his ultimatum. "I come back for Grace. Where is she? I sent her a wire from Chicago."

"Yeah, she got it," old Luke rumbled. "So you got cows of your own now?"

"A couple of thousand head," Angel told him casually. "A ranch in Montana. And cash in the bank. I ain't braggin', Luke. I'm just tellin' you to show you you were wrong about me."

Karsten stared at the floor. "I reckon I was," he said at last. And only Angel knew what a concession that was from that stubborn old cattleman who had known him since he was knee-high to a grasshopper.

"You've done all right," Old Luke continued. "I haven't done so good since you left here. Used poor judg-

ment. Itch got among the LUK's an' raised old Ned. I'm closin' out here on the Trinity. Thinkin' about makin' a fresh start up north in the spring."

"Anywhere north of the Yellowstone is made to order for cattlemen," Angel said. "She's a gold mine. Where's Grace?"

"You don't want to see Grace," he muttered.

"The hell I don't!" Angel exploded. "You still got somethin' stickin' in your crop? She's past twenty-one."

"Yes. And married three months ago," old Luke blurted out. "Married to Bob Ratsey. Brother to the feller you downed in Post Oak the day you quit the country. I'm sorry, Angel."

Angel Patmore stood for ten seconds as if he had frozen in his tracks. His body was taut, immobile, but his mind was not. He could see the whole sequence like pictures flashing before his eyes. Out of sight, out of mind. All his struggle, his self-discipline, his achievement, gone by the board. Once more he had gambled and lost. Yet he did not feel the pangs of a loser. That puzzled him.

Why, he thought to himself, I ought to be as mad as a hatter, or plumb brokenhearted. Gosh darn it, what kind of a feller am I, anyhow?

Aloud he said, "Well, it's a free country. But she might have told me. I reckon I'll travel."

"Have a drink before you go," old Luke offered.

They lifted glasses by a sideboard. Angel looked at the red liquor, at Luke Karsten, at the room which had once seemed the most homelike place on earth and which he now perceived to be shabby, uncared-for, less attractive by far than his own log house on the Marias. He looked out the window at

miles of brown flatness, at a dust banner streaming where a rider fogged a bunch of horses toward the LUK corrals. It was all over. There was not any shouting. He had come two thousand miles to draw a blank.

"Here's lookin' at you, Angel!" Karsten gulped his drink.

"Here's how, Luke!" Angel drained his glass, put on his hat, turned to the door. "So long."

Two miles along the trail to Post Oak Angel stopped to look back. A whimsical notion made him laugh aloud. He took two silver dollars out of his trousers pocket and jingled them in the palm of his hand.

"Nothin' but a gamblin' fool! Never have two silver dollars to clink together," he said thoughtfully. "Well, he was wrong. I proved him wrong. But it don't mean nothin' to anybody—only to me, I reckon."

Only to himself! Angel suddenly felt a vast sense of relief, a profound gratitude, as if some weight had rolled off him. He did not quite know why. It took him some time to get that figured out. It was a simple conclusion he ultimately reached. Certain things that happened to a man were just growing pains.

"She said a woman ain't like a tree. You don't plant her and go back long after to find her roots in the same spot," Angel murmured. "Now I wonder was she referrin' to Grace—or to herself?"

He swung his horse about and pointed straight for San Marco, the nearest railroad point, all at once impetuously eager to get back to the Marias. Angel wanted to prove one thing more to himself—and this time he was not going to take three years to reach the point.

ONE GOOD TURN *deserves another*, says the old maxim—but Mina Colcord thinks of something bigger and finer than that when she holds Grat Spane's fate in the hollow of her hand.

Raw Land

By Harry Sinclair Drago

WITH the short afternoon of this wild, snow-lashed January day drawing to a close, Mina Colcord, a fevered look in her dark eyes, watched from her kitchen window as her husband floundered through a waist-high drift on his way to the barn to feed the horses. He was a clumsy, grotesque figure in his big sheepskin coat, his hat tied to his head with the bright woolen muffler she had knitted for him that Christmas.

A sharp sword-thrust of pain ran through her young body as she stood there. Thinking she was going to faint, she pressed the rounded softness of her cheek against the glass and was grateful for its coldness. It was her second warning that her hour of martyrdom was much nearer than she had supposed. In the early afternoon, she had not been certain; now there was no mistaking the clutching of the tiny hands of her unborn.

Last evening, before the storm struck, they had decided to start for town in the early morning, Asa wanting her to have the best of care and not minding the extra expense; for he had done well on this little ranch on Ute Creek. The storm had brought their planning to nought. But, believing that another day or two did not

matter, it had not seemed important.

All that was changed now; and Mina found herself facing the terrifying fact that the doctor was thirty-five miles away in Ruby City—long, cow-country miles—and not even a woman nearer than Mrs. MacGlashin, at the Ox-bow, high in the Calico Hills.

In the pleasant summertime, Mina had visited there, a ride of less than two hours. She had not mentioned it



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to Asa, but she had hoped that a lull in the storm might permit him to go for old Mrs. MacGlashin. She would come if she knew she was needed.

"And I'm going to need her so desperately," Mina murmured, digging her fingers into the window frame.

With the coming of evening, the growling of the wind had risen to a shrill soprano scream. All day long it had raged at the corners of this snug, stout house that Asa had built for her, here in the lee of the Ute Creek bluffs. Listening to its baffled fury, she told herself that never in the three years since he had brought her to this new home, a bride of eighteen, had there been such a blizzard as this.

Having in mind these bad storms of winter, Asa had built the house close to the foot of the bluffs. He often spoke of how protected they were; his words coming back to her now made her wince. If they were protected here, what must it be like out in the hills and on the big flats where the full sweep of the wind had play? A glimpse of him, his shoulders hunched and his head lowered, throwing all his great strength against the storm, fighting for every foot he gained, filled her with a crushing awareness of her complete isolation; there'd be no fetching Mrs. MacGlashin tonight. In her mind's eye Mina could see that mountain road to the Ox-bow, choked with snow, perhaps long since blotted from sight. It made her realize how foolish she had been to think of it.

Asa pulled down a generous quantity of hay for the horses. He had to break the ice in the pails before he could water them. He cleaned out the stalls then. The scouring snow had rubbed his face red. Working, his

breath steamed on the frosty air. The scraping of the shovel, every sound, even the munching of the horses had the sharp, ringing clearness that comes only with great cold.

He went to the barn window when he had his chores finished. It was white with hoar frost. Raising his sleeve, he rubbed away the rime. Peering through the cleared space, he could see the near-by creek, where the snow had piled up against the willow brakes in great drifts, eight to ten feet high. His steers were somewhere along the creeks, drifting with the storm. He knew he was bound to lose some; but in his concern for Mina, he was only dimly conscious of the plight of his cattle.

A momentary eddying of the storm gave him a glimpse of the flats beyond Ute Creek. There were brown spots out there where the frozen, hard-packed earth was showing. The sight heartened him.

Thinking aloud, he said, "A team might get through. It'll be tough going, but it is a chance." And then, with bitter self-reproach, "We should have started an hour ago; there's no bringing the doctor here."

In such a storm, they might easily lose their way. Death would be the inevitable penalty; in all that first twenty miles to Dutchman's Ford, there wasn't so much as a sheep camp.

"I know the country too well to get lost," he argued. "I'll find the ford all right. It's terrible asking Mina to make the trip, but—"

He broke off abruptly, struck by a sudden thought. There was a back-country saloon at Dutchman's Ford; a saloon and nothing else. It bore an evil reputation. But that was beside the point; on a night like this Soapy Tap-

per would have a big fire going. The last time he had passed the place he noticed that Soapy had it well banked with sod. It would be warm even tonight. They could stop there for a few minutes and thaw themselves out. He knew how Mina would feel about ever setting foot in that saloon. But this was no time to be swayed by such prejudices. He wondered why he had not thought of it before.

He made his decision instantly. It placed a great responsibility on him but he felt strangely relieved. Running to the feedbox, he filled a battered pan with oats for the team, spilling some in his haste. He had not been grain-feeding the horses of late; but they'd need something to keep them warm tonight. He put the pole in the light rig then and filled the wagon box with hay. Over it he spread an old buffalo robe, and over that a second robe. Well tucked in, Mina would be warm enough in the wagon.

For himself, he placed a blanket on the seat; he could wrap it around his legs. He put a shovel in the wagon. Carrying the double harness into the stall, he tossed it on the team.

It did not take him long to hitch. The horses were long in hair. The wind fluffed it and flattened out their manes as they stood waiting while he closed the barn door. With some urging, he got them started and drove up to the house. Habit was strong in him, and he paused to knock the snow from his boots before he stepped into the kitchen. Mina sat at the table, the color all gone from her face.

"Mina, you've had another bad spell," he said, anxiety tearing at him.

"I'm all right now," she answered. She raised her face and smiled; he looked so grave and sorry, standing

there, as though he were responsible for her suffering. She laid her hand against his cold cheek. "You mustn't be afraid, Asa. You've got to help me to be brave. Maybe the storm will blow itself out before morning."

His heart was in his eyes as he gazed at her. "Mina, I've hitched the team. I'm taking you to town. I've got some hay and the robes in the wagon. We'll take some blankets from the house. When we get to the ford, I'll carry you into Tapper's place until you get warm."

Mina stared at him aghast. Slowly she shook her head. "No, Asa—no! We couldn't make it—and that saloon—in my condition. Those men—"

"Mina, we're going," he said, his voice harsh with an authority he had never used to her before. "There's no other way."

"No, Asa, please!" she insisted. "It's brave of you to offer to take me. I know you are thinking only of me. But I've got to think of the baby."

"I'm thinking of both of you. That's why we're going. You'll need some things. Tell me where they are and I'll put them in a bag for you."

He sounded so sure of himself. She couldn't remember when he had ever failed her. It made her believe he must be right now.

"Very well," she murmured as she rose, "we'll go." Suddenly her arms went around his neck and she kissed him fondly. "I'll get the things," she said. "I'll feel better if I walk a little."

Night fell suddenly soon after they crossed the creek. But Asa had taken his bearings. He had the wind at his back now, and knew he could not go far astray as long as he kept it there. The team had settled down to its task

and moved along without much urging from him.

At long intervals he found traces of the road. There was no keeping to it. Time after time the drifts forced him to strike off across the flats. He spoke to Mina; she said she was warm. The cold was getting into his bones. When he could stand it no longer, he got down and trotted alongside the horses. Once the team stopped and could not be urged forward. He went ahead and sank in the snow to his armpits. He knew this dry wash. It told him exactly where he was. Knowing he could not hope to find a way across, he had to quarter and swing far around it.

It all took time. He could see that the horses were tiring, and fully half the distance yet to go. But the valley was widening and the great force of the wind was scouring the flats clean. He got back on the wagon and used his whip. For the better part of an hour, they made fairly good time. The bitter cold was slashing at him, but he didn't mind; Mina was warm and resting easily, and they were getting through. Nothing else mattered. A few minutes later the team balked at a drift. He got out his shovel and went ahead to dig a way through.

Back in the wagon, Mina pushed back the blankets and robes and raised herself on an elbow. She was in great pain. Seeing they had stopped, she called to Asa; but the wind wiped away her pitiful cry before it reached his ears. The mad urge to get out of the wagon and run and run until she fell exhausted in the snow almost overcame her. But the spell passed, and when Asa put his shovel under the seat, she lifted her head again and spoke to him.

"How long have we been here?" she

asked, raising her voice to make herself heard above the whooping of the wind.

He had to work his jaws before he could answer. "Not long," he said, his words all blurred with cold. "About two, three miles more." With his mittened hand he brushed the snow off the robe.

"You're freezing to death, Asa," Mina cried. "I wouldn't know your voice. Let me drive the team awhile; you get under the robes and warm yourself."

"I'll make out," was all he said, but as he trudged along beside the horses, he told himself that no man had such a wife as he.

Repeatedly he shouted at the horses and slapped old Belle on the withers, trying to coax more speed out of them. It was to no avail; he knew the whip would have no better effect. Bucking the drifts and wallowing through snow that was belly-deep on the level for miles had taken everything out of the animals. Knowing horses, he realized that the team would never get them to town. Every passing minute made it plainer; indeed, the fear grew on him that they might not even make the ford.

In the wagon, wide awake, Mina listened to every turning of the wheels. "How slowly the horses move," she whispered.

Asa walked all the time now, not wanting to add his weight to the team's load. It was all he could do to drag himself along. If he needed anything to tell him how far gone he was, it came a few minutes later when he missed his footing and sprawled full length in the white smother. It was the first of many times that he went down.

He told himself that he should be seeing Soapy's light. With squinting eyes he tried to peer through the hissing flakes. He could see nothing.

"Be right on top of it before I locate it tonight," he muttered, brushing away the fringe of ice on his brow. His thoughts did not go beyond Dutchman's Ford. He knew he might find some horses there, but they would be saddle stock and not broken to harness. What they were going to do, he didn't know. It seemed relatively unimportant compared to the driving necessity of reaching the ford.

He wondered how cold it was. The snow had an icy edge. He could hear it strike his coat and drift off with an abrasive rustle. He had seen this country show its fangs before, and it had not made him love it any the less. His loyalty to it did not waver now, but he saw it for the harsh land it was. *It's all right with me*, he thought, *but I didn't have any right to ask Mina to face it.*

The team had stopped. Old Belle was puffing and snorting. Asa did not urge them on. He knew it was time to breathe them again. Throwing an arm over the mare, he huddled against her, trying to draw what warmth he could from the animal.

Surely Tapper's saloon could not be much farther. The crucifying thought that he might have missed the ford came to him. But he knew better than that. All along here the South Fork bottoms were choked with willow and scrub; it would turn him back until he finally found the ford.

There was no sound from the wagon. Surely the Lord was looking out for Mina tonight. He bowed his head humbly, thinking how helpless a man could be at times.

With an effort, he roused himself and shouted at the team. The horses refused even to raise their drooping heads. Making his way around in front of them, he caught them by the curb-chains and tried to break them out. He met with their uncompromising fore-legged resistance.

It puzzled Asa. Remembering his experience at the dry wash, he turned his back on the team and began to investigate. He had gone only a few feet when something loomed darkly before him. Another step, and he knew what it was. To make sure, he moved off to his right a yard or two. There, blinking at him through the snow, was a buttery daub of light; this wooden wall was the rear end of Soapy Tapper's horse shed. Trying to run, he made his way back to the team.

"Mina, we're here," he told her; "we're at the ford."

She caught his excitement and the faint note of pride in his blurred voice. He had a right to be proud, she thought, for he had accomplished what few men could have done. Even though those bright blades of pain were slashing at her again, she smiled at him.

"I'll have you inside in just a minute," he promised.

She watched him as he struggled with the horses and finally got them into the shed. The animals seemed barely able to drag one leg after the other. Asa was no better off. Panic seized her momentarily as she realized their situation. She sat up in the wagon, hardly aware that they were out of the wind and snow.

"Asa—" she cried. "Asa, we can't go on. Look at you! You are half dead with cold!"

"I'll be all right as soon as I get thawed out," he assured her. "Don't

worry about me."

"And the team—there's no going on with them," she insisted. "You know it!"

"They're in pretty bad shape." It was a grudging admission. "There's horses here, but they're just cow ponies. They'd never go to harness." He shook his head hopelessly. "I've been putting this moment off for a long time. I—I don't know what we're going to do."

"You could borrow a pony—when you are warm, Asa." The suggestion was born of desperation, but her tone was steady as she voiced it. He stared at her amazed as comprehension came to him.

"And leave you here, you mean?"

"Yes. If you could bring the doctor—"

"No, Mina, no!" he cried. "You don't know what you're saying. Our baby born in a saloon!"

"What difference can it make? What can it matter?" The fortitude of her pioneer forbears was speaking now. "After all, this is still a wild land—"

"Damn this land!" he muttered. "I hate it!"

"No, you love it, Asa; and so do I," she said. "Some day it will be a fine, rich land; and some of it will belong to us. Our baby will be proud of it. You ask Soapy Tapper if you can bring me in."

Asa Colcord thought he knew this woman who bore his name, but as he stumbled up to Soapy's door, he told himself he would never know her.

His hands were too cold to turn the knob, but it was flung open, in answer to his banging. A white, ghostly figure, he stumbled into the barroom and stood there swaying dizzily, the heat of this room making his senses reel.

With fogged eyes, he saw Soapy,

obese, heavy-featured, standing behind his bar. Two men had a foot on the bar rail. Asa knew them: Stuffy Andrews, who rode for the big 7 Square outfit, and young Grat Spane, a rough, tough puncher with an unruly shock of red hair. In the year that had passed since he drifted into this country, Grat had had many jobs and stuck to none. If he had caught on somewhere for the winter, Asa could not name the spread.

A third man had opened the door. It was old, watery-eyed Bitter Creek Cassidy. He owned a little range on the headwaters of the South Fork.

These men, evidently trapped here by the storm, had settled down to make the best of it. Now, their conversation abruptly arrested, they froze in grotesque attitudes and stared at him with unbelieving eyes. Soapy was no less confounded. His hooded gaze suddenly wide and incredulous, he leaned forward, his bulbous stomach draped over the bar, and sucked in his breath noisily.

"Why, it's Asa Colcord—or what's left of him!" he cried. "Man, you're about done for. Here—" he grabbed a glass and a bottle of rye—"git a shot of this into yuh in a hurry. Yuh need a drink if ever a gent did. Where yuh from, anyhow?"

"Ute Creek," Asa mumbled.

Stuffy Andrews got a chair from the card table and tried to slide it under him as he saw him sway. Asa steadied himself against it but he did not sit down.

"All the way from Ute Creek on a night like this?" Soapy demanded. "You must be mad."

"My wife—she's going to have a baby," said Asa. "I'm taking her to the doctor. She—she's outside in the wag-

on. I'd like to bring her in, if I can. She—she hasn't long to go. I hardly know what to do. My team is all stove in. If I could leave my wife here and borrow a horse, I—I could bring Doc Mighels back with me—"

"A baby?" Soapy gulped. "A baby—" His loosely-hinged mouth fell open and something akin to terror froze on his crude face. The others were equally aghast.

"You mean the baby will be born here?" Stuffy Andrews gasped.

Grat Spane flashed a glance at the door as though considering bolting the place at once. Old Bitter Creek was nervously shifting from one foot to the other. Reading the look in their eyes, Asa realized the enormity of what he was asking.

"I'll be damned!" Soapy groaned. As men went, he didn't amount to much. There had been talk about him, and always to his discredit, rumor once having it that keeping this saloon was only a cover for his real business. Asa thought of these things now and knew he should have considered them before speaking. And yet, there was Soapy suddenly glaring fiercely at the others and saying, "Well, why not? Why can't Miz Colcord have her baby here? Will yuh tell me what yo're waitin' for? Yuh bring her in here at once; and yuh be mighty gentle with her. Well?" he roared as they hung back for a moment.

That angry bellow had the desired effect. The men shuffled out and Soapy came around from the end of the bar. He poured some whisky into the empty glass and made Asa down it.

"Yuh git them frozen things off," he commanded, "and stay away from the stove till yuh thaw out. I'll shake up my bed a little. Shame to ask a woman

to use it—ain't got no sheets or nuthin'—but it's the best there is here."

Asa tried to murmur his thanks. Soapy growled him to silence. "Ain't nuthin' to be thankin' me for," he said. "We'll stretch a rope across the room and hang up a couple of blankets, so yore wife will have the back of the saloon to herself."

The men brought Mina in. Bitter Creek helped Soapy string up the blankets. From where he sat, Asa stared at them dully. He wanted to help; he wanted to go to Mina; but there was a lethargy on him that kept pushing him deeper and deeper into his chair.

His frost-bitten face was beginning to burn. He knew that rubbing a little snow into it every few minutes would help. Even that was beyond him.

Stuffy Andrews went out again. When he returned, he said, "I put up your team."

It roused Asa. What was he thinking of, sitting here like this? He had to go on to town. He had to borrow a pony. Slowly he dragged himself to his feet.

He said, "I'll have to ask one of you to loan me a horse. I've got to be going."

Something touched Grat Spane's blank, inscrutable face briefly and was gone. He said, "My bronc's in the shed. But you're all in. You better stay here with Miz Colcord. I'll go fetch Doc Mighels."

Asa was surprised and touched—having faced the storm for five hours, he could appreciate what Grat was offering—but he could not rub out of his eyes his reluctance to put the fate of Mina and the baby in Spane's hands. By every tale he had heard of him, he was shiftless and unrelleable. Looking

for a man you could trust in an emergency, you would not have picked Gratspane.

Grat pretended not to notice, but he read that reservation in Asas mind.

"The kids right," Soapy spoke up. He had finished hanging the blankets. "Hes young and tough as bullhide. Yuh'd never make it yoreself, Colcord." He turned to Stuff. "Yuh let Grat take yore hair chaps. They'll keep his legs warm."

"Grat—you know how much depends on this," said Asa. "You won't fail me?"

"I'll fetch him as I said," Grat answered quietly.

Soapy poured him out a drink before he left. "Git this inside yuh and be on yore way," he ordered. Grat dashed off the liquor and hurried out. Soapy put the bottle on the back bar, signifying that his establishment was closed for the night.

Old Bitter Creek insisted that snow water was better than snow itself for drawing the sting out of frost bite. He worked over Asa until the pain was gone.

"Yo're shore lookin' better," Soapy observed.

"Yes, I'm coming around all right," Asa agreed.

He went back to sit beside Mina. She reached out and caught his hand.

"Asa, these men have been very kind to us," she murmured softly. "We must never forget."

He squeezed her fingers affectionately and said nothing. A few minutes later, she had another bad spell. They were coming oftener now. He knew they would. He prayed that Grat would be back with the doctor in time.

At the front of the barroom, Soapy, Bitter Creek, and Stuff Andrews sat at the card table, a strange silence on them. Had there been any place they could go, Stuff and Bitter Creek would have gone. But they were prisoners too. At Soapy's suggestion, they tried playing cards. It soon palled on them. Soapy got up and turned the lamps low.

"Never thought about the light gittin' in her eyes," he explained.

Bitter Creek built up the fire, moving back and forth on tiptoe, so as not to make any noise, and being rewarded by a smothered curse from Stuff when he closed the stove door with a faint bang.

Soapy wound his watch at midnight. Grat had been gone barely an hour.

"Be some time before he gets back," Stuff murmured guardedly. He listened to the booming of the wind. "This country is sure gettin' a housecleanin' tonight."

Mina was in great pain again. They winced every time she groaned. Unconsciously, they were trying to bear her agony. Somehow, her suffering seemed to rub some of the hardness out of their faces.

"Life and death—" Soapy murmured soberly. He shook his head. "Makes a man think."

The others nodded and said nothing, but they were humbled too. And far out on the flat lands Grat Spans rode with head lowered against the storm and roundly damned himself for having been so ready with his offer.

Many times he pulled his stumbling pony out of the drifts. The blizzard was really beginning to howl. At first, he had been contemptuous of its sting, for, already a man of parts, he knew what it was to come to grips with the

northerners on the Llano and the knifing cold of the poganip on Nevada's high deserts. He had been taking this storm seriously enough for the past hour. He knew a man didn't want to make a mistake tonight. It made him a little more careful not to miss the heavy stand of aspens at Iron Point.

There, out of the wind, he managed to build three fires. He got in between them, turning round and round until he was warmed through. He still had the long swing around Ruby Mountain ahead of him. It wouldn't be easy, but he knew he'd make town now.

It was long after midnight when he stalked into the hotel barroom where Doc Mighels sat playing poker. Doc listened to him and then took another look at his cards.

"I'll play this hand, then we'll go," said Doc. "You get yourself a drink and order me one."

"Fifteen miles to Dutchman's Ford, and a howling blizzard tearing at you all the way," one of the players commiserated him. "Wimmen might have more consideration."

Doc won the pot and heaved himself to his feet—he was a big man—and said, quietly reproving, "Charley, miracles don't wait on you or me or the weather."

Downing his drink, he led the way to his office and got his worn black bag and the few things he knew he would need. There was nothing prepossessing about Doc Mighels, in his ill-fitting clothes, the front of him invariably spattered with cigar ashes. Undoubtedly he drank too much. Judged by city standards, he wasn't even much of a doctor, his ways unorthodox and often harsh. But whatever he was, he gave of himself without stint, and when he walked into a sick room, it often seem-

ed that some heavenly healer entered with him; for just his presence seemed to imbue the ill and dying with hope and courage, and his dowdy clothes and the shabby black bag, with the hole worn through one end from years of rubbing against his saddle skirt, were forgotten.

It was that way with Mina Colcord. He reached her in time; and it was in Soapy Tapper's barroom, her son was born.

Asa knew what he owed these men; he also knew how things were with Grat Spane. He called Grat aside. "I can make a job for you, Grat," he said. The boy shook his head and thanked him.

"A job is what you're needin'," Asa told him. They gazed at each other for a second, and Grat knew that Asa had his secret.

"It wouldn't do any good," he muttered. "I wouldn't stick."

In the morning, Mina let them see the child. Grat's hard young face suddenly corded into a bleak mask. Without a word, he turned and headed out to his pony. Never glancing back, he rode away.

Soapy insisted on holding the baby. Mina gazed at him and saw through all his worthlessness and found something good.

"Yo're sure somethin' to be proud of, young feller," Soapy declared admiringly. "I—I was sorta hopin' you'd be a girl." Mina saw his chin quiver and knew that memory was reaching back across the years to something that was clean and good. Then suddenly, as though frightened at what he beheld, Soapy laughed nervously. "Shucks!" he exclaimed. "Men is what this country needs. Like as not they'll be sendin' yuh off to Congress or sunthin'."

There was the usual amount of rustling that spring. Mina, occupied with the boy, was only remotely aware of it until in the dusk of one evening early in May, Fred Isbell, of the 7 Square, rode into the yard as they sat at supper. He spoke to her through the window and asked Asa to step outside, raising his voice against the barking of the new pup which they had recently acquired.

Something in Fred Isbell's flat, expressionless face told her that he did not come on pleasant business. Asa joined him, bidding the dog be quiet. They spoke for a few moments. Mina caught Asa's shocked "No! You don't say!"

"We can't be mistaken," Isbell answered. "We mean to put an end to it this time." They talked on for a while. Leaving, Isbell said loud enough for her to hear, "You be at my place before daybreak, Colcord." Asa nodded, and the man rode away.

Although he had not finished his coffee, Asa went down to the corral beyond the barn instead of returning to the house. He stayed there a long time, his foot on the corral gate. He might have been watching the new colt that had been foaled this morning. Mina thought differently, and when he came back to the house, she had to put a question to him to elicit any information.

"Rustling again," he told her. "Isbell says everybody is organized this time. I'm to be at his place before sunup." She saw his mouth tighten. "I wish I didn't have to go." And then, without meeting her gaze, he added lamely, "There's so much to do right now."

He did not deceive Mina. She busied herself with the dishes, not wanting to embarrass him. "I know how busy

you are," she said. Believing she knew what was troubling him, it was not easy for her to hold her voice steady. "But rustling has to be put down. This seems to be the only way to do it."

The matter ended there, and they were careful not to refer to it again. It placed a restraint on them that made the evening long.

Asa finally knocked the ashes from his pipe and went to bed. At two in the morning, she heard him out in the kitchen, making himself a cup of coffee. Later, he let himself out of the house, and, in a few minutes, she heard him riding away. It was the first time he had ever left without kissing her good-by. Plainer than words, it told her what impended.

The morning dragged along. Out in the yard, Ring, the dog, barked and growled by turns at the end of his chain. Half a dozen times Mina came to the door and bade him be quiet. At noon, Fred Isbell and four others, Stuffie Andrews among them, rode up to the house. Isbell's manner was grim and uncompromising; but he found something in Mina's eyes that made him reframe the question he had come to ask.

"Mrs. Colcord," he said, markedly uneasy, "you haven't seen anything of Grat Spane over this way today, have you?"

Though Mina heard him without surprise, she felt her blood go cold. Fred Isbell had told her only what she had already surmised. "No," she said, "I haven't seen anyone."

The man nodded, but was not convinced. Mina could feel him weighing her answer. He said, "He can't be far; he's wounded some. His trail was as plain as day to Mud Springs. When we lost it, he was headin' for Ute Creek."

"He's very likely gone down the canyon," said Mina, a slow fury beginning to burn in her. "I couldn't imagine him coming this way."

Fred Isbell did not say what had given him the idea; but Mina knew what was in his mind, and it did not need the cooing of her baby, awake in his crib, to tell her. Their eyes met and something ran between them that made Isbell flush darkly under his tan.

"You are free to search the house and barn," she said.

"No," he protested hurriedly. "Sorry we bothered you, Mrs. Colcord. We'll whip out the canyon. We made sure old Bitter Creek won't do any more rustling; and we're going to be just as sure about Spane." He started to turn his horse. "If your husband and the others come looking for us, tell them where we are."

"Where is my husband?" Mina asked.

"MacGlashin, your husband, and quite a bunch pulled away from us to round up Soapy Tapper," he informed her. "It shouldn't take them long." He raised his hand to his companions and they rode away at a driving gallop.

Still burning with indignation, Mina watched until they were only puffs of dust in the distance. Suddenly they were gone altogether. She felt as they did about rustling, but it did not keep her from hoping that Grat Spane would win free. Thought of him, so young and his life forfeited to his foolishness, filled her with nausea. He had served her well, and not counted the cost to himself. Soapy had been kind to her too; but she had an entirely different feeling about him. She pitied Soapy and Bitter Creek, though she realized that the pattern of their lives had made the end that had overtaken them well nigh inevitable. Once, there

might have been some excuse for them; some hope that they would change their ways. That time had long since passed.

She couldn't believe it was quite that way with Grat Spane—at least not yet. She knew the good and the bad in a man were often sadly scrambled; that sometimes it needed only a push in the right direction to enable him to find himself. Feeling as she did, she wondered what she would have done had it been in her power to help Grat get away.

"I don't know," she murmured soberly. "I perhaps would have done the wrong thing."

Weary of the dog's barking, she freed it, and straightaway it raced to the barn door and raised its voice louder than ever. "Ring, you come here at once!" she called. "Whatever has got in—"

She stopped abruptly, struck by the fact that the barn door was closed. For days, indeed ever since the weather had turned mild, it had stood open. The closed door, the frantic dog—understanding came to her quickly. Her cheeks tightly drawn, she walked to the barn with long, clean strides. She had to put her shoulder to the door to force it back.

Quite simply, she said, "Grat, if you are hiding up there in the hay, come down at once."

In the silence that followed, she was aware of the pounding of her heart. She knew he was here and that she had already decided what she was going to do with him. A moment later, a rustling in the hay rewarded her. A board creaked above, and then a pair of overall-clad legs appeared on the ladder. When Grat finally stood before her, she saw that all the swagger and

bluster had gone from him. He had found some old rags in the barn and managed to bandage his wounded arm.

With one foot clawing the other and looking the picture of dejection, he said, "I don't care what you do with me, Miz Colcord. You can turn me over to the posse if you want to. I jest want you to know I didn't come here 'cause I figgered you owed me anythin'."

Mina felt her throat tighten. "I'm sure of that, Grat."

"My bronc folded up on me," he explained. "I knew I couldn't make the canyon—so I came here. I—I never thought how it might look." He tugged at his hat nervously and looked away, his eyes bleak and bitter with self-reproach. "I know I don't amount to anythin', but there is some things I draw the line at," he muttered with a trace of pride.

"If I were you, I wouldn't be so quick to admit to myself that I didn't amount to anything," Mina reproved him. "That may be what is at the bottom of your trouble. You get yourself up to the house now, and be quick about it."

Never having dressed a gunshot wound, it took her twice as long as it should have. The only antiseptic she had was a bottle of creosote dip that Asa used on the stock. It had tongues of fire that made Grat Spane grit his teeth.

"Your arm will be all right," she told him, pausing at the window to scan the flats. She knew that Asa and Myles MacGlashin and the others riding with them must be coming soon. It warned her that she had no time to lose. "A horse wearing a Cross T brand drifted in here this spring," she told him. "No one ever came to claim it. I'll saddle it for you, and you can go."

Grat swallowed hard. "Miz Colcord, you shouldn't be doin' all this for me," he protested huskily. Mina turned on him very sharply.

"Maybe you are right," she said flatly. "Maybe it is a waste of time to try to help you. If you are determined to be hanged for a rustler, it doesn't make much difference whether you are hanged here or over in Wild River. And that's what it will get to, Grat, unless you change your ways. Just getting to a new country won't help you, you know."

"Yes'm," he muttered, as miserable as though he were actually about to be jerked to eternity.

"I know you got off to a bad start," Mina continued. "So have a good many others. Those who changed their ways are here today, respected." Her eyes were level and unafraid as she gazed at him. "You can amount to something if you'll only have half as much faith in yourself as I have in you."

Opening the door, she told him to wait there until she returned.

It was only a matter of minutes before she was back with the saddled horse. About to ride away, he looked down at her, and Mina saw something in his eyes that said she had not made a mistake.

"Don't you worry about me, Miz Colcord," he advised haltingly. "No reason why you should believe me, but I'm goin' to try to amount to some-
thin'."

Mina smiled at him. "I believe you, Grat," she murmured, her eyes beginning to mist.

Late that afternoon, riding home alone across the flatlands, Asa encountered Doc Mighels. Doc had seen the smoking ruins of Soapy Tapper's sa-

loon at Dutchman's Ford and knew what had happened to Soapy himself.

"It's a sad day's work," said Doc. "I hear that only Grat Spane got away."

"Yes," Asa nodded soberly. "I don't know how to tell my wife, Doc. The two of us always felt indebted to those men. I'm afraid she won't understand."

"I think she will," Doc said confi-

dently. "Our womenfolks have a surprising way of mixing sense with sentiment. This is a wild, lawless country; but they don't have any trouble; no matter where they go, they are safe and respected, if that's the way they want it. Maybe it's because they understand so well."

THE END



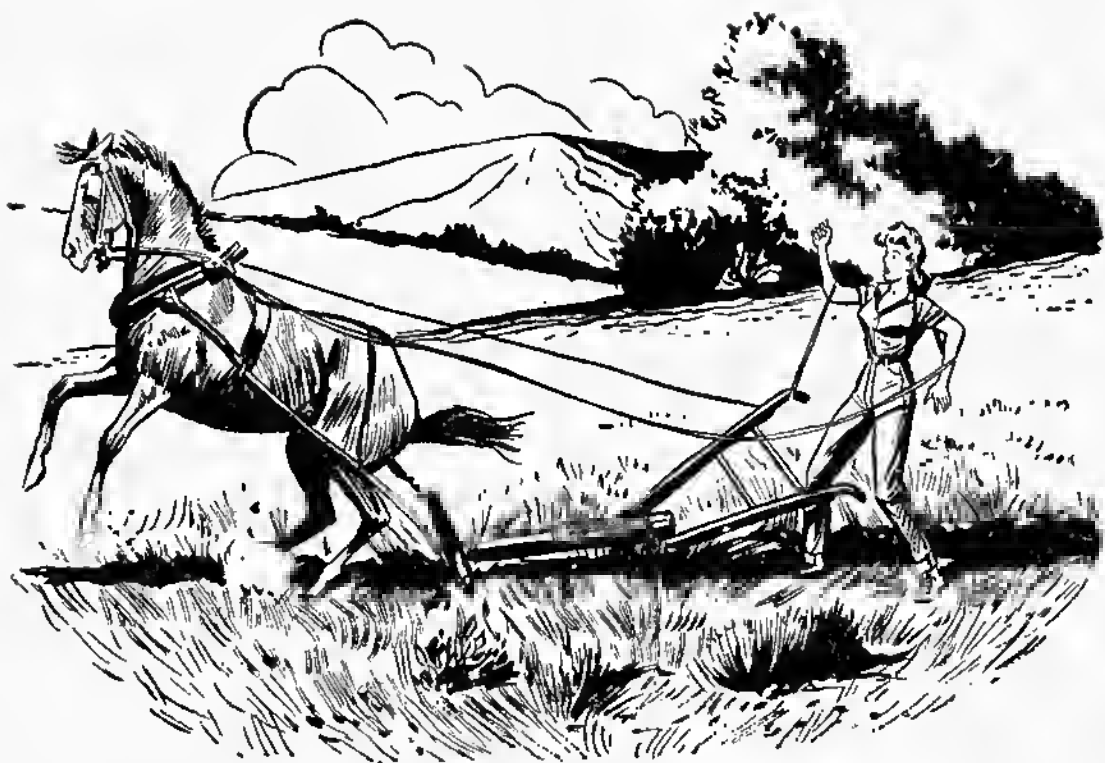
Oh, Ride The Dry River!

By S. Omar Barker

Oh, ride the dry river and ride the gray hill,
Where the dry western wind that can never be still
Has withered and scorched to the roots every blade
Of grass in the sun and of grass in the shade!
Ride where the poor cattle that haven't yet died
Drift hungry and bony and starvation-eyed
In vain hopeless search upon tottery feet,
For a swallow of water, a thin bite to eat.

Oh, ride where you will when the withering hand
Of drouth dries the rivers and parches the land,
And up from your heart feel the bitterness rise
Of a man beaten down by a whip from the skies—
A sun-man no longer a friend of the sun,
With death all around you, and naught to be done.
Old cowmen tormented by dried water holes
Know how the long dry spells can wither men's souls,
Yet ride the dry river and ride the scorched hill,
With a hope in their hearts even drouth cannot kill.

Oh, ride the brown mesas and ride the parched plain—
And some day come riding back home with a rain!



Enchanted Ranch

By Arthur Preston Hankins

CHAPTER ONE

The Quitter

CHAPPED and spurred, Aaron Rose rode his gray saddler at a pleasing singlefoot into Campbell's Flat, the county seat. Before the hardware store he swung easily to the ground, tied his horse, and, nodding right and left at acquaintances, entered the stairway that led to the offices above the store.

He opened the first door on the right, on which was painted:

*Marcus T. Lloyd
Attorney and Counsellor-at-Law.*

AARON ROSE "disappears" and plays an unexpected role as rangeland magician for the benefit of a comely and charming tenderfoot.

Lloyd's stenographer looked up from her battered desk and smiled at the caller.

"Good morning, Mr. Rose," she greeted him.

Aaron Rose smiled gravely and lifted his hat. "Pretty mornin', isn't it?" he said. "Early spring we're

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havin'. Mr. Lloyd gone to court yet?"

"No, he won't be going for a quarter of an hour. Did you wish to see him?"

"If he isn't too busy, ma'am."

"I guess he's seldom too busy to see you, Mr. Rose"—and with a smile she rose and went through a door marked PRIVATE.

"Have him come on in," Rose heard the attorney tell the girl.

Without waiting for further invitation, the rancher stepped through the door.

"Mornin', Aaron," was Attorney Lloyd's greeting. "Pretty mild for this time o' year. Have a seat."

The girl went out softly closing the door behind her.

"Well, Aaron," said the thin-nosed lawyer, "I guess we got 'em goin', eh?"

Aaron's well-cut lips contracted to a straight line, but his perpetually good-humored face was creased by a smile that offset the sternness of the lips.

"Got 'em goin' nothin'!" he contradicted, rather mildly. "I came in, Mark, to tell you to drop the case."

"What! What's that?"

"Drop 'er. Go to court this mornin' and ask for a dismissal. Pay the costs, and send me your bill for that and your fee. I'm through."

"Why, Aaron, we're just beginning to get somewhere! The water company has damaged your ranch. They've cut down some of your most valuable trees. Their canal has spoiled the marvelous scenic effect of your entire property. You, as a deep lover of nature, have suffered. In your eyes, your property is ruined. Furthermore—"

"There's no furthermore to it, Mark," interrupted the rancher. "Go down to the courthouse, Mark, and call her off."

"Aaron, I didn't know you were a

quitter," reproached Lloyd.

"Neither did I," grinned the rancher. "But you got my instructions, Mark. I'm *positive-ly* through. That's me!"

Without more ado he passed into the outer office, smiled good-by at the busy stenographer, and clanked into the dusty hall. Down in the street, he walked along for a block and entered the corner saloon.

Several men leaned over the bar. Others hovered over a warm stove at the rear end of the room, for the April mornings were still crisp in this foothill country. The men at the bar looked up quickly as the swinging doors flew open.

"The coldest bottle o' beer you got, Jennings," said Rose. "This is my thirsty mornin'."

"How's yer suit comin' on?" Rose was asked, as the beady bottle, with the white froth climbing up its neck, was set before him.

"I quit today," was the short reply.

"Ye ain't givin' in to 'em?" came from three or four voices.

"Yep. Goin' to New York soon as I can straighten up a bit. Be gone three or four months—maybe six."

"Goin' to New York! What for, Aaron?"

"Fun."

"Well, guess ye c'n locate her there, boy. What'll ye do with the rancho?"

"Goin' to put Oswald Jacks in charge of her till I get back."

"Good man, all right."

"And I told him I didn't want to have one single letter from him while I'm away. I'm gonta get him all the grub and things he'll need for six months and let him go to it. I want to forget Chaparral County and have some fun."

"I guess they'd 'a' beat ye in the end,

Aaron," remarked a man. "I was tellin' my wlf last night ye was a fool for throwin' good money away. They got more'n you have, Aaron."

Over by the stove a large man suddenly rose from his chair and lurched toward the group at the bar. A glance was enough to show that he was under the influence of liquor, though it was only ten o'clock in the morning.

Aaron Rose's lips tightened as, in the clear lower portion of the back-bar mirror, he saw and recognized him.

He was a man as large as the rancher himself. He possessed a great pyramidal head, topped off by a shock of heavy black hair. He wore a canvas coat, corduroy trousers, and heavy tramping-boots. This man was Cyrus Hurley, the rancher's enemy for the past two years. Hurley was the local *zanjero* for the water company that Rose was suing.

A *zanjero*, it may be necessary to explain, is a man who has charge of the distribution of water among the various ranches that are supplied by an irrigation system. Before he had bought his ranch, Aaron Rose had served as *zanjero* in this water district. Hurley had been his chief assistant. They had quarreled over Hurley's perpetual drinking, which rendered him unfit for his work; also Rose had suspected him of giving certain ranchers more water than they paid the company for, thereby pocketing small tips for himself. Rose had not discharged him because of his family, but let him off repeatedly with warnings. Then Rose, having saved his money, had bought the Rose Ranch, titled by himself because of his name and the countless roses that he grew wherever they could thrive best. And, to the surprise of the neighborhood, Cyrus Hurley

had been appointed *zanjero* in his stead. And Cyrus, in a spiteful spirit, had done a great deal of injury to Aaron Rose since the days when they both had been working together.

When he reached the bar he sidled up to the rancher and leered at him wickedly.

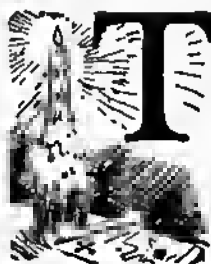
"I'll tell the world," he said rather thickly, "that ye was a fool, Rose. We had ye beat from the start. You poor fish, ye don't know that it was me that kep' ye from gettin' yer perm'nt Injunction, do ye? Ye don't savvy that it was me that worked on the chief engineer and made him believe it was best to run that canal across your poor piece o' land instead of Cummlings's, do ye? And d'ye savvy why? I done it to get even with ye f'r many a dirty little deal ye handed me when ye was *zanjero*. That's what I done, ye poor fish!"

Rose laughed shortly after a moment or two of silence. "Good imagination you got, Cy," he said, winking at the bartender. "Don't try that stuff on me."

But Aaron Rose was not as sure as before that his destination would be New York.

CHAPTER TWO

Aaron Gets An Idea



THAT evening Aaron Rose sat in his ranch house, brooding over the events of the day. The early California evening was cool and brisk. He looked through the window at his beautiful acres, and sighed deeply.

Pasture lands were turning green before him, and the smell of early flowers

floated in through the open window. Here and there over these pasture lands were groves of gigantic oaks, and beyond was a forest of spruce and sugar pines. There were patches of chaparral that Rose had refused to eliminate because of their wonderful color under the changing light of the sun. Red cattle nibbled at the young grass. There were sheep, of a fine breed, herded into a corral for the night. His horses rubbed their noses against rail fences or bit playfully at one another. It made a scene that Aaron Rose loved, but, in his mind, it was marred by the irrigating canal that crossed it from end to end.

Deeply he brooded over his difficulties. He had been brooding over them entirely too much of late. Obstinate he had refused to use one pint of the water that flowed gurglingly through his picturesque ranch. Matters were not so bad as he allowed himself to imagine. The Rose Ranch, a dry ranch until the lateral had been constructed, might have been under irrigation now, but for the stubbornness of its owner. His land had doubled, nay, trebled in value since the water crossed it, but he could not see it thus. Aaron Rose was pretty much of a dreamer, and, in reality, cared little for this world's goods. He wanted peace and plenty and the joys of the big outdoors—little more. He loved his stock and his work more than the returns they brought him. Hence his bitterness toward the big water company, who cared not for scenery but dividends, which they did not need.

And so his old enemy, Cyrus Hurley, and this big company's engineer were at the bottom of his defeat. And the court had been with them, for Aaron's lawyer had, at the preliminary hear-

ing, pointed out that the ditch might just as well cross Cummings's property as the Rose Ranch. On this showing they had got their temporary injunction, pending final action by the court. But in the meantime the dirty work had been done, and at the second hearing a permanent injunction had been denied.

Well, he'd fix them yet! He was not without ideas. That morning he really had had it in mind to stop the useless controversy, for he had reached the conclusion that the jury had been "fixed." He really had intended to go to New York for a short time, to forget the entire matter. Now, however, he had no intention of going to New York. But he was glad that he had spread the news of his intended trip. He was glad, too, that he had spoken of the big supply of provisions he meant to lay in for Oswald Jacks to use during his absence. No, he would not go to New York, but he would go somewhere. And the supply of provisions that he would buy would startle the groceryman.

He left his chair and went to the wall telephone. He called up Jacks and told him to report for duty in the morning. Then he went to bed, feeling better than before.

Cyrus Hurley had given him a great idea. He would make them pay damages for the great trees that had groaned to the ground on the Rose Ranch. They'd pay dearly, too. No man could beat Aaron Rose out of his rights and get away with it!

But, manlike, Aaron Rose had figured without the girl. Someone has facetiously said that it is a noble thing for a man to devote his life to mankind, but that it is nobler still, and far more interesting, for him to devote it

to womankind. Aaron Rose had no girl to work for—no girl to show him his foolish stubbornness. But a little boy who wears no clothes, and carries a quiver filled with arrows and a bow, was at that very moment chuckling against his sleeveless wrist at Aaron Rose.

CHAPTER THREE

Grapevine Creek



HAVING thus decided that what ailed Aaron Rose was too much Aaron Rose, Cupid had looked about for the girl and found her. He found her riding down Grapevine Creek, some twelve miles from the Rose Ranch, in a big wagon, squeezed in between two men. She was a pretty girl, and her hair was dark and wavy, and there came a dimple in each cheek every time she even thought there might be occasion for a smile.

The road down Grapevine Creek was so old that no one in that country could have told, if asked, when it had been built. The district through which the wagon groaned its weary way was an abandoned district, and for years and years the road had not heard the ring of pick or the scrape of a shovel. Grapevine Creek itself had tended to the road. In a thousand places it had washed over it and uncovered boulders that had once been hidden by the hand of man, or piled up snarls of driftwood. Also its moistness had festooned grapevines overhead like the tangled hair of a mad woman. Over the drifts and boulders the wagon rocked up and down, the four-horse team plowing its way through the grapevine entangle-

ments, the riders bending forward and plucking at the vines, tearing them away from their throats, expecting every moment to be bung by the neck until they were dead, dead, dead. Behind them a large load of household goods swayed from side to side, and any moment the riders expected the entire mass to pitch off into the creek or against the bank on the opposite side. The pretty girl rode between the driver and her brother lest she be likewise lifted from her perch and hurled into oblivion.

Her name was Diantha Stanley. Her brother's name was Duncan Stanley. The name of the driver does not matter, since he was hired only for that one trip, and was nursing a terrible grouch because he had not had the sense to refuse when Diantha looked at him so reproachfully with her big black eyes. He knew the road down Grapevine Creek of old. For years no teamster had attempted it. Yet here he was, praying only that his reach would hold out to the end of the silly trip.

About a mile beyond the point where the travelers were struggling onward there lay a tiny valley in the cup of the hills. Here Grapevine Creek swung in toward the steep hills on the right of it, so that it did not break the tiny level spot and divide it in half. Here stood an old tumbledown cabin, and this cabin was the goal of the three who fought their way down the creek bed road.

Now, if one were to walk from the shaky and ancient cabin, pass over the little flat, so green and tempting to an inexperienced agriculturalist, cross Grapevine Creek, and climb through alders, bays, and oaks a way, he would come upon a dense patch of chaparral.

This great patch extended for miles, almost to the outskirts of Campbell's Flat, the county seat. It was what is known in the West as locked chaparral. Its branches were so intertwined that nothing larger than a bird could pass through the thicket. But by crawling on hands and knees, and occasionally lower still, one could pass through it, provided he needed neither food nor water for perhaps a month.

But if, on this particular day, one were to have made the attempt, telling himself that he would just crawl a short distance to see how it felt, he might have crawled unexpectedly upon a man seated on the ground in one of the occasional open spots, training a long telescope upon a distant ridge beyond the rushing Falcon River. And if the crawler were acquainted with Mr. Aaron Rose, owner of the magnificent Rose Ranch, he might have wondered what Mr. Rose was doing there, provided he had not lost his reason altogether.

But here he sat, and did not know that there was another human being within twelve miles of him. And behind him was a cave—a long, tunnel-like cave forty feet in length by about seven in diameter, and in the cave was a store of provisions that would have convinced the crawler that Mr. Rose meant to stay for an indefinite length of time. Also, there were canvas bags, filled with water from Grapevine Creek. All the comforts of a home, for there was firewood in plenty all about—the remnants of fallen trees that had gone down in a great forest fire that swept the land before the chaparral grew there.

So here placidly sat Aaron Rose, and it must be admitted that his perch on the steep hillside, surrounded by a vast

and uncompromising sea of chaparral, was a far cry from the bright lights of New York City.

And, as he gazed through his telescope at the distant mountains, he heard the agonized rumble of a wagon coming down the creek below him.

"Great guns! What's that?" he muttered. "A wagon? A wagon hasn't come down that canyon in twenty years!"

CHAPTER FOUR

To New York, One Way



ABOUT a week had elapsed since Aaron Rose had telephoned "Oz" Jacks to come next day and take charge of the ranch. The new foreman had appeared on schedule, and shortly after his arrival Aaron had driven his team of immense Clydesdales to Campbell's Flats, where he purchased what was perhaps the largest single order of groceries that the Emporium had ever sold.

It was late in the evening when the purchaser started back with his load. It was eight miles from the town to the Rose Ranch. Approximately five miles from home Aaron turned off on a cross-road, despite the protests of the squat bays, and traveled for an hour into an uninhabited country.

Reaching a particularly secluded spot that he had in mind, he stopped the Clydes and began unloading groceries.

He took off a goodly portion of the load, and, a piece at a time, carried it into the woods and hid it in a remote little ravine. Also he hid a large bundle that had been in the wagon when he

left the ranch. Then he drove hurriedly home and deposited what was left, to the credit of Oswald Jacks.

Next morning, dressed in his best and with his suitcase at his feet, he was driven to Campbell's Flat by the new foreman. At the county seat he strolled about, gossiping with old acquaintances, and took pains to let it be known that he was going to New York.

Then he sauntered toward the depot, where the agent tried to sell him a round-trip ticket. But he took a one-way instead, arguing that he might not wish to return to California by the time that the return date had arrived.

When the long overland train pulled in, with one huge locomotive ahead and another pushing, he waved his hand right and left and boarded his sleeper. It was nearly night. An hour after the train had started climbing the mountain, he slipped out at a watering-station, grip in hand. The officials of that train saw him no more.

He knew that there was a little town quite close. There was little about that country that he did not know. However, the overland was wont to pass it as if it were a jungle camp of tramps. Rose walked to this town, where he felt sure that no one lived who knew him, awoke a sleepy garage man, and ordered a car for a ranch in the neighborhood of Campbell's Flat.

They were away shortly, and long before midnight the passenger ordered the driver to stop, telling him that the ranch was up a certain cross-road that they had reached, and that it was too rough for machine travel by night. The distance was short, he said, and he did not mind walking.

He paid the driver, watched him turn his car and start back, then grip-

ped his suitcase and hurried along the road over which he had driven the bays the day before.

He reached his cache in the ravine, and found everything as he had left it. He undid a parcel and shifted into the rugged clothes that he was wont to wear at home. Instantly he felt much better. His "good clothes" he placed in the empty suitcase, which he had let no one handle but himself.

Next he walked cross-country through the woods and came to a little ranch, every detail of which he knew. Here, stealing up to a corral, he borrowed four burros which the owner used on occasional prospecting trips up the Falcon River. He knew where to find the pack saddles and ropes in the stable, and in a little while he was hurrying the small burden bearers back to his cache.

In the early hours of the morning he deposited the last of his hidden supplies on the banks of Grapevine Creek, close to the ramshackle old cabin on the abandoned John Wharton Place.

Just before dawn he returned the burros and hastened away, for it was about time for his neighbor to be up and doing.

It required all of the entire day that followed for him to crawl with his necessities of life under the chaparral to the hidden cave. He could carry or drag only one piece at a time, and it was a herculean task. But Aaron Rose was a herculean man.

At last everything, including the telescope, was in the old tunnel. He had gone back to the creek as darkness fell and carried up water in his canvas bags. Then, sore and weary, he had collected fuel and built a small campfire, over which he squatted and cooked his evening meal.

The tunnel needs a bit of explanation, for it was known, perhaps, to no one in that country but Aaron Rose. At least Aaron thought that this was true.

Over seventy years before, in the days of the Forty-niners, a long ditch had been run from the headwaters of Grapevine Creek to a gold mine miles down the valley, high up above the Falcon River. The mine had long since been forgotten, as were the men who had operated it. In that day, no doubt, the ditch had extended through heavy forests. Through the forests, cattle had wandered in later years and trampled down the old ditch until scarcely a vestige of it remained. Then the great fire had swept the country, and chaparral had grown up where the forest had stood. So the ditch was forgotten, the greater part of it hidden away in the dense chaparral.

But in following the contours of the hills, the diggers of the ditch had occasionally found it necessary to tunnel. And the cave that Aaron had chosen as his secret rendezvous was one of these tunnels, through the rocky brow of a hill. For years, both ends had been closed by the shattering dirt and eroding rock.

In trailing a wounded mountain lion into the chaparral one day, the loose dirt had given way under Aaron's feet, and the secret tunnel was exposed.

At the time Aaron had thought what a wonderful hiding-place this unknown tunnel, still closed at one end, would make for a man who wished to hide from his fellows. But then it had not occurred to him that he ever would want it for that purpose.

Now that he did want it, however, he found that a little work was all that was required to clear the mouth en-

tirely, and this he did the first morning after he had dragged his goods to the tunnel's mouth.

And now everything was in readiness for his lengthy stay here in the chaparral, while his acquaintances believed that he was in New York City. He had a few books and magazines. He would not be very lonely. And in two weeks a man would follow the ridge that he had looked at through his telescope, a man who would drive a laden burro ahead of him. For the passing of this man he was waiting.

Then there appeared upon the scene a dark-haired man and a girl with black hair and dimples, and they moved bag and baggage into the old John Wharton cabin. He was not going to be so lonely after all, it seemed! The possibilities looked promising.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Knock 'Em Dead"



ARON had little fear that the new arrivals down below would discover his secret hiding-place, for they would be too busy repairing the old cabin and establishing themselves therein to make any exploring trips of the hills about them. Even if they felt so inclined, there was not one chance in a thousand of their crawling under the locked tops of the chaparral merely for pleasure. One did not ordinarily stroll about for diversion or in a spirit of exploration on his hands and knees!

It was about noon when they arrived. They unloaded their belongings before the cabin and paid the teamster. He immediately swung his team about

and departed, without one backward glance.

In days that followed Aaron saw the two at work on the cabin, cleaning out the old spring to get clear domestic water, and attending to numerous other tasks of settlement. He noted that the girl did most of the work, and at this he frowned. Often he heard her singing, and her clear contralto notes drifted up the hillside in pleasing melodies. Aaron liked to hear a woman sing.

She was indeed a busy little body, always doing something with sleeves rolled above her elbows, and doing it with a snap and preciseness that appealed to him. Every time he saw her carrying two buckets of water from the spring, he ground his teeth. What on earth did her husband mean by allowing her to do that heavy work? He was in the cabin most of the time, while the girl was almost continually at tasks outside. He was a good-for-nothing loafer, Rose decided, and longed to give him a piece of his mind.

And what on earth were they doing there, anyway? Were they just camping out? No, everything pointed to the belief that they had come to stay. Were they crazy? Did they expect to make a living on those rocky forty acres, with the creek bed dry as a bone by the middle of June?

About ten days had passed after their coming when, early one morning, Aaron saw the two walk hand in hand up the canyon. They were away so long that he decided to go down and investigate, but shrank from such a thing instinctively.

They returned shortly before dusk, proudly driving an old bay horse that Aaron instantly recognized. It belonged, or had belonged, provided it

had now changed hands, to a rancher who lived at the upper end of Grapevine Creek. It was twenty-three years old if it was a day—an old mare that had at one time been a three-minute trotter. If they had paid over ten dollars for the mare they had been stung. Behind the still proud old animal bumped a dilapidated buggy. And from the buggy, when the outfit halted before the cabin, the owners took sundry articles, among them a small plow, heavy harness, and one section of a harrow.

"Great guns! They're going to try to farm!" Aaron groaned.

The unhitching of the mare took fifteen minutes, both at work. She grew impatient and nipped at the girl. In retaliation the girl shook a reproving finger in her face and fondled her neck. They unbuckled every buckle in sight, Aaron thought, and it would take a harness maker to put the harness together again.

But at last the old crowbait was free of leather, whereupon she lifted her still youthful heels, lammed out a couple of wavy kicks to right and left, and trotted magnificently on to the flat, to bury her graying muzzle and long teeth in the ankle-deep grass.

"They're going to try and plow with that old speed horse!" Aaron groaned. "She's still good for a quarter of a mile at a three-thirty clip! Lord! Won't the dirt fly!"

Next morning the fun began. At an early hour the man, proving by every movement he made that what he knew about horses would fill many volumes, led old Knock 'Em Dead—which was the mare's name—down to the flat. The girl followed, the center of a set of single work harness. They left the mare grazing and went back to the

cabin, returning with the small plow between them.

"Never occurred to 'em to make the mare drag it down," chuckled Aaron. "This is gonta be good—if nobody gets hurt!"

And now they packed the harrow down.

When the mare was harnessed to the plow—a feat that had required nearly half an hour—there arose a lengthy discussion down below as to ways and means of starting the agricultural project. But at last it seemed to be decided that they would begin operations just below the cabin, plow lengthwise of the flat, and end up at the creek side when the work was done. At once the girl established herself between the handles of the plow, and the man took the lines and began swaying them up and down as a signal to Knock 'Em Dead that they were all set. Through his telescope Aaron noted the stern look of determination on the face of each. "Get up! Get up!" floated up the hillside.

Immediately Knock 'Em Dead got up.

She gave a leap that stiffened the tugs, jerked the girl forward—all but her feet—and started the man to trotting. Another leap and the handles of the plow left the girl's hands. She fell flat on her face in the grass. The plow turned sidewise and went skidding over the turf, while the mare and her driver went trotting rather gracefully, with the lines stiff between them.

The girl sprang nimbly to her feet and began waving her hands after the departing pair.

"Tell her whoa! Tell her whoa!" she shouted shrilly. "I fell down!"

The driver had not noticed this at all. He was too busy watching the

mare to see that the girl was not trotting along with them.

"Whoa!" he responded. "Whoa!"

"Pull on the lines!" screamed the girl. "Pull hard and say 'Whoa, Knock 'Em!'"

The man accordingly put more pressure on the lines and repeated the magic words. Knock 'Em Dead was used to being driven with a tight line, and doubtless it had not occurred to her at all that she was not traveling at the required speed. While she loved to go, and possessed an abominably hard mouth, she was an amenable old creature; and as the driver added more weight on the reins and continued to call "Whoa!" she responded, slowed up, and stopped.

Running, the girl rejoined the group. Another lengthy discussion took place. The result was that Knock 'Em Dead and the plow were turned in a wide circle that half covered the diameter of the flat, and returned to the starting-post again.

Once more the point of the plow was inserted in the ground, and the girl stood between the handles, her cheeks aglow, her eyes wide and expectant.

"Get up!" floated up the hillside.

And away they went again.

This time, however, the farmerette was prepared. When Knock 'Em Dead leaped forward, she leaped forward, too. So did the plow skinner. At a good clip they started down the flat. Immediately the plow point came out of the soil like a trout leaping for a fly. The running girl lifted the handles, as she probably had been told to do, and the plow point dived for the bowels of the earth.

Immediately the traces went taut. Old Knock 'Em Dead stopped, leaped forward, stopped, leaped, stopped and

shook her head angrily—and then began to stamp a nervous foot.

"Get up! Get up!" coaxed the man.

Knock 'Em Dead leaped once more, viciously. Nothing followed her. She was not accustomed to this. If a buggy or a racing sulky did not move when she felt of it—well, that was a funny sort of buggy or sulky. She knew nothing whatever about that kind. If it refused to move with the ordinary pull that she had been accustomed to give for many years, then it could not be moved at all. She stopped, therefore, and lowered her muzzle to the grass.

"Get up! Get up!" raged the man. And, "Get up! Get up!" the girl's shrill voice added.

Knock 'Em Dead lifted her head, shook it rebelliously, and pawed the earth alarmingly.

Another discussion. Another trial. Another failure, with results similar to those heretofore depicted. Then the girl sat down hard on the ground and began to cry. The man wiped sweat from his brow and looked down at her commiseratingly, patted Knock 'Em Dead's neck in a sort of reproachful manner, then went and patted the bowed head of the girl.

"Poor nuts!" grieved Aaron Rose. "I wish I could help 'em out. But I might as well be ten miles from here. They'll never plow that strip o' land with Knock 'em Dead. I doubt if I could do it myself."

It was a world-worn girl who at last lifted her head and got slowly to her feet. Once more they tried to coax the old mare to serve her new masters, but without avail. So they sorrowfully unhitched her from the plow and took off the harness. They loosed her. She snorted, kicked up her heels, raced to the other end of the flat, and buried

her nose in the grass.

With slow movements the man and the girl dragged the plow to the higher land, threw the harness upon it, and went to the cabin.

Five minutes later the girl had started to turn over the soil of the flat with a spading fork.

Aaron pulled his hair. "That'll take her a lifetime!" he moaned. "My heavens! What's she thinking about! And why isn't her husband doing that work instead of her? I'll go down and hurt that fella yet."

For half an hour the girl spaded earth clumsily and slowly. She rested often. At the end of that period she was looking at the palms of her hands frequently, and occasionally wetting them at her lips. But she worked bravely on, resting repeatedly.

Then the man came out, and, after what seemed to be an argument between them, took the fork from her hands. He worked with more skill and strength, but he stopped often, too. Then, suddenly, he threw a hand over his heart and swayed. Instantly the girl was on her feet and had thrown her arms about him. He stood there awkwardly, head lowered. Then Aaron saw him smile and try to resume the work.

But she grabbed the spading fork out of his hands and stood with it behind her. When he tried to take it away from her, she ran from him. Stopping a short distance off, but well out of his reach, she lectured him emphatically, with the result that he walked to the cabin and disappeared.

Once more the girl began the spading, but Aaron knew that her hands were blistering fast and was not surprised when she finally threw herself down in the grass and hid her face

against her arms. He saw her comely shoulders quivering, and knew that sobs were shaking her body.

Now, Aaron Rose was a tender-hearted man, and quite unexpectedly there raced down both cheeks two hot tears.

Angrily he absorbed them with his shirt sleeve. "This is the limit!" he growled angrily. "That fella's a helpless invalid, I guess, and she's gonta try and make a living for the both of 'em down there. They'll starve to death! They're poor as church mice, or they'd never bought that worthless piece o' land. What in the dickens can I do for 'em?"

The answer to this did not come to him until long after the girl had given up her hopeless task and gone into the cabin for a rest. But when it did come, about three o'clock that afternoon, he acted upon it instantly.

Chuckling at the wildness of his plan and the fun that he knew it would give him, he crawled under the chaparral to the creek bottom. There, hidden from the cabin by fragrant bays and alders, he slipped down the creek and had put many miles between him and the John Wharton Place before darkness came.

CHAPTER SIX

The Magician



ARON ROSE lay close to the odious canal that crossed his property and had cost him so much money and worryment. Darkness had fallen, but up at the house the lights still gleamed. Hard-working ranchers ordinarily retire early, and he expect-

ed the light of Oswald Jacks to vanish any moment. But he had to wait an hour before this occurred.

He allowed Oz half an hour to drop to sleep. Ten seconds probably would have been sufficient, but Aaron was taking no chances.

At the end of that time he arose and walked toward the lower corral below the big red barn.

Here he entered a shed in which odds and ends were kept. He lighted matches and finally discovered what he sought—an old lead rope. Oz would not miss it, for he was not yet familiar with the equipment of the ranch. The next thing that he appropriated was a canvas plow collar, one that had been cast aside as having seen its day. He dared not go to the stable and get the collar now in use for the horse he had in mind. Oz Jacks was plowing, too, these days, and that collar would be missed. The one on the John Wharton Place, he knew, would not fit the enormous column of one of his precious Clydes if it fit the scrawny neck of Knock 'Em Dead. But this old collar would answer for a short piece of work. Then he found a sack and filled it with rolled barley at the barn.

With the barley on his shoulder and the other articles in hand, he walked down to the Live Oak pasture, as it was called, and brought soft, suspicious snorts from his grazing herd of work animals.

His voice was sufficient to allay their fears. Aaron loved his horses, and the Clydesdales loved Aaron. In a very short time the old collar was about the neck of Omar Khayyam, the lead rope looped in his mouth as a bit, and the sack of barley over his withers. Then Aaron leaped to the broad, slick back. Whereupon Omar started obediently

for the stable, doubtless thinking that this was an odd hour of the twenty-four to go to work.

A pat on his neck guided him. The rider turned him, and they trotted ponderously to the far end of the pasture. Here Aaron dismounted, deliberately tore down his own rail fence, and led Omar through the gap. He rode away, leaving the fence as it was. The chances were ten to one that the rest of the animals would not find the gap, and they were ten to one, too, that, if they did find it, it never could occur to them to wander through. Such is the domestication of the patient, home-loving Clyde.

But Oz Jacks, when he found Omar missing and saw the gap, would imagine that the horse was not true to breed, or had lost his senses when he wandered away from his friends.

Omar's trot was a crime, but Aaron kept him to it. Long before morning they entered Grapevine Canyon and stumbled up it over the stones. Half a mile below the old John Wharton Place, Aaron dismounted, tied Omar to a tree, deposited the barley close at hand, and went back to crawl to his cave in the chaparral.

He was up at an unearthly hour. It was necessary for him to rise early in order to cook his breakfast and drown his campfire before the newcomers were about, for they must not see his smoke. The dawn was still gray when he stole out and down the creek to Omar Khayyam, whom he found lying down and sound asleep.

He roused the horse, led him to the creek for water, and gave him a generous feed of barley. Watering him again after he had eaten, he begged him to be patient until evening, and then hurried back to his rendezvous.

Omar could go without his noonday meal in a cause like this.

All day long, intermittently, Aaron watched the girl trying to spade up the cattle-patched land. She had no gloves, it seemed, but had tied handkerchiefs about her burning hands.

Once or twice the man came out to help her, but she would not allow it. She rested for an hour at a time, but bravely returned to her task again. What a pitifully small space she had spaded up when evening came! Wearily, about four o'clock, she trailed to the cabin. The water buckets were full. She found, for Aaron had seen the man sneak cautiously down to the spring with them when her back was turned. He had set them down twice between the spring and the cabin. Once Aaron thought the girl was about to catch him at this forbidden task, but she had stopped her work only to watch a robin filling his bill with the worms that she had spaded up.

Impatiently the watcher waited for darkness. When it came, and he saw the lights gleaming in the cabin windows, he hurried down and followed the creek bed to his horse. He watered and fed him, then rode him up the canyon.

Some time had elapsed, and now the cabin lights were out. He waited half an hour to make sure that the occupants were asleep, then led Omar across the flat and up to the little plow.

In no time the tangled harness was straightened out and Omar into it. Aaron hitched him to the plow. He set the point, and a soft flip of one line started Omar on his accustomed task.

Never before had Omar's master made him walk so fast, and never before had he plowed at night. But what

mattered it? All things were well with Omar when this man directed his destiny.

In regular, even rows the soil rolled from the mold board. The only sound was the soft thud of Omar's immense feet as they trod the matted grass. Furrow after furrow appeared as if by magic. Gradually the land turned blacker and blacker under the moon as the plowers, weaving back and forth, neared the creek. The last furrow was turned at two o'clock in the morning. They harrowed the piece twice in three-quarters of an hour.

Then Aaron Rose had another inspiration. He left the plow close to the completion of the work. At the end of the last furrow he left the harrow, instead of dragging it back to the place where he had found it. He unharnessed the Clyde, and laid the harness on the ground, leaving the traces still hooked to the single-tree. He went for Knock 'Em Dead's collar and laid it where it would be if the old mare had plowed and harrowed the land while the ranchers slept, and had jumped out of her harness when she had finished.

Then the big boy-man called Aaron Rose, chuckling happily, rode Omar down the canyon and back toward Rose Ranch, loosing the horse in the county road two miles from home. He dog-trotted most of the way back to Grapevine Creek, in order to be on hand when the girl came out to spade that morning.

Diantha Stanley was cooking breakfast over the little second-hand wood stove that she and her brother had acquired when they started on their great adventure. Duncan had risen before her and begun work on his book,

the one over which he had been toiling for thirteen years—the book that had ruined his health and which seemed destined never to be completed. It was a book of general science, and science was progressing with such leaps and bounds that Duncan was obliged to revise and revise and revise his book continually.

Their home had been San Francisco, where she had worked as a typist while Duncan pursued his studies. He had no college degree, but he was an ardent student and, by dint of hard work and what seemed almost boundless scientific knowledge, hoped to overcome this drawback. She had been able to support him, and now and then he had earned a little from lectures that he delivered.

Then, while they were struggling bravely and managing to make both ends meet, came the bitter blow. He had dropped in the street one day. Taken to the Emergency Hospital, where he had been resuscitated, his case had been diagnosed as angina pectoris, a rather rare disease of the heart. He was advised to renounce tobacco, alcoholic liquors, and coffee. He must do no more physical work than absolutely necessary, and he must not study so hard. Furthermore, he ought to leave the city and get out into the open air of the country.

So, to make a long story short, here they were on the John Wharton Place, which they had bought with the returns from a sacrifice sale of the property in which they lived in San Francisco. They were orphans, and the property had been left to them at the father's death. There had been four hundred and eighty dollars remaining after they had paid seven hundred for the place, moved their belongings to

a village at the head of Grapevine Creek, and bought a month's supplies. Now seventy-five dollars of that was gone, and was represented by Knock 'Em Dead and the equipment with which she was supposed to farm for them.

Both brother and sister were lovers of nature. They had fanciful hopes that they could live off the soil until Volume I was completed. Then the royalties would come rolling in while Duncan turned out Volume II. Living on vegetables and berries and eggs—they meant to buy hens later—they would whirl through Volume II, and when it was offered to the public they would be independently rich.

It is not a very new story, at that.

But Knock 'Em Dead refused to till the land, and they were seventy-five dollars out at the very start. However, she would take them in the buggy for their mail and supplies; and if ever Diantha could get the garden spot spaded up and seeded, it would be no time until the vegetables would be up. She knew just how to raise them. There were instructions on the back of every package of seeds.

But this morning, as she fried bacon and eggs, grave doubts assailed her. All of her hopefulness seemed gone. Duncan, working away furiously with his pencil and countless notes, was not worried at all, it seemed. He was always that way when at work. But one can think of mundane matters while frying eggs, and Diantha did. A terrible black cloud seemed to be hanging over them. She knew in her heart of hearts that she would die before that land was spaded up. And if she did not die, the soil would be too dry for planting before she—

"Ouch!"

She had taken hold of the frying pan to turn the eggs, and her blistered hands responded instantly to the heat of the iron handle.

What were they to do? Her dark eyes grew tragic. Everything looked hopeless—black as ink. Oh, why had they been such fools!

With a heart-rending sigh, she stepped out onto the rickety porch for a dipperful of water to add to the boiling coffee. In a weary way she glanced down at the flat.

The dipper dropped from her hand. She stared like a somnambulist, asleep with both eyes open. Her lips parted. She closed her eyes wearily, while it seemed that her brain was swimming off into space. Was she ill?

She opened her eyes again. Then—"Duncan! Duncan!" she shrieked. "I—I believe I'm losing my mind. Come here quick!"

She was standing in a tragic attitude when the running man reached her side.

"Duncan! Look!" she gulped once, then closed her eyes and breathed huskily.

For several seconds he stood with his arm about her slim waist. The time was so long that she opened her eyes again.

"Say something!" she whispered. "Am I crazy? What is it?"

"Suffering cats!" he gasped.

"Let's—let's go see what it means—what's the matter," she stammered excitedly.

Half running, hand in hand, they hurried down to the flat, where he stooped and ran his long white fingers through the mellow soil.

"It's—it's done," he decided scientifically. "Yes, sir, it's done. But who did it?"

She pointed. "There's the plow over there. Let's go look at it."

They hurried across the harrowed land to bend over the mysterious plow that had worked for them in the night. Here, too, just at the end of the work, lay the magic harrow. And to the single-tree was hooked the traces, and the harness and collar lay on the ground as if Knock 'Em Dead had sprung out of them when her task was done. There was Knock 'Em Dead, grazing peacefully on the slope of the hill.

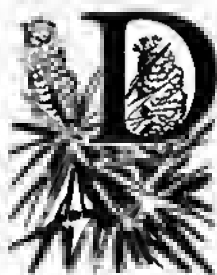
"I—I wonder if she'd show signs of perspiration, Dunc," said Diantha in an awed little voice.

"Let's go see," he replied.

And as they later stood, one on either side of the dry and wondering Knock 'Em Dead, The Magician, hidden in the chaparral above them, laughed until the tears ran down his sun-bronzed cheeks. Who wanted to go to New York City in quest of amusement?

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Piece of Paper Sack



UNCAN STANLEY brushed the long black hair back from his eyes and gazed speculatively from Knock 'Em Dead to the marvelous implements across the field.

"It's scientifically impossible," he gravely decided. "Yes, sir, scientifically impossible."

This point settled, he thought to remind Diantha that the breakfast might be burning, so they hurried to the cabin.

Breakfast was burning, but they

cooked more.

"I know what has happened," the sister burst out suddenly, breaking more eggs over the pan. "That old fellow Brooks has done this. I just know it, Dunc. He knew when he sold Knock 'Em Dead to us that she wouldn't plow. You remember he said she *might*. So after we'd gone with her, his conscience got to troubling him, and he came down last night with a farm horse and did the job, hoping we'd be mystified and never think to attribute it to him. Well, we were mystified for a time, all right," she added with a complacent smile of one who is not deceived. "But we know who did it. Shall we mention it to him or not—thank him, you know—and try to pass it off as a joke?"

Her studious-minded brother gave this careful consideration. Duncan Stanley did not believe in deciding upon a matter until his scientific mind had weighed it pro and con.

"I believe I wouldn't mention it to him at all," was his conclusion. "It might embarrass him greatly. And, now that the plowing and harrowing are done, what does it matter if he did sting us? Knock 'Em Dead is good as a buggy horse, and we'll need her for that."

"But what about other work?" she asked.

"Perhaps she'll learn in time," he said. "Why worry? The land is well prepared for seeding. All we have to do is to seed. And by the time Volume I is out three months, we can buy twenty plow horses if we want to, and put moleskin blankets on 'em during the winter. But we'll get one of these little garden tractors then, I guess. I've always wanted to monkey with some sort of machinery. If such stupid

people as I have met can get results with machinery, what ought not I to accomplish?"

"How you hate yourself, Duncan!" she laughed.

"Of course, as usual, Diantha, you mean just the contrary. Is it against me that I have confidence in myself? I should know what I am capable of doing."

"Certainly, certainly, Dunc. Don't try to start a quarrel. Let's eat—the eggs are ready, anyway, and surely the coffee's boiled sick. I'm anxious to get at the planting now."

"Of course," he agreed, drawing his chair up to the table.

"What'll we plant first?" murmured Diantha, pouring out his coffee.

"What do you like best of all the vegetables?"

"Watermelon," was her prompt return.

"*Citrullus vulgaris*," he mused. "A vegetable, decidedly, from the neck down, with an ellipsoidal head that surely must be fruit. Has a very low food value, I'd say. But if you yearn for watermelon, little one, watermelon seed shall go first into the ground. Next choice."

"Muskmelon."

"Live longer on them, I guess. Number two is muskmelon. And number three?"

Diantha placed the remainder of the breakfast on the table and seated herself opposite him.

"Let's see," she said thoughtfully. "I think I like roasting ears next best. But you choose one, Dunc."

"Sirloin steak," replied Duncan.

Then they both laughed.

"Honestly, I don't like any of 'em," he continued. "But we've got to live on vegetables, so I'll drive myself to

it. We'll decide on my first three to-night. I fancy attending to the melons and the corn will take about all the time that I can spare this morning. I'm right in the middle of Aristotle now, and can't think too much about garden stuff. Old Aristotle is a bear—he's giving me a lot of trouble, that old bird! Think you'll have time to type a couple of chapters today?"

"Plenty," she told him cheerfully.

Which goes to prove that the happy, carefree life of a rancher permits him plenty of time for mental stimulation.

Shortly after breakfast the fortitudinous pair fared forth with hoe and rake and packages of seeds.

"Watermelon first," said Duncan as they reached the cultivated land. Then he read the instructions on the back of the package of seeds:

"When all danger from frost is past, plant from ten to twelve seeds in hills, about six inches apart, leaving five feet each way between hills."

He frowned at it. "Simple, concise, and quite unmistakable," he remarked. "Let's make the first hill right here, Diantha."

Eagerly they went to work. Diantha poked her index finger into the ground, and Duncan dropped a seed in the hole and sifted loose soil in on top of it. They treated a dozen seeds in this fashion, forming a circle with them. Then Duncan took two steps and indicated the spot for another hill.

Up in the chaparral Aaron Rose watched them through his telescope. "What they plantin', I wonder," he muttered. "Something in hills, seems. Cucumbers, squash, pumpkins, melons—something like that. Any one of 'em will be frozen stiff the first night after the plant breaks through the surface of the ground. Poor nuts!"

Throughout the morning, he watched the operations down below. And just before noon—for the work required more time than the brother and sister had counted upon—Aaron decided that they were planting a row of corn close to the creek bed.

His agricultural instinct was outraged. Grapevine Canyon was low and cold; vegetables that were very susceptible to frost ought not to be planted before the first of June. Their work was only a waste of time. How could he let them know their ignorance and make them conform with Mother Nature's inexorable laws?

Then night settled down. There came the hum of insects over the chaparral. The sweet odors of budding willows floated up from Grapevine Creek to the nostrils of the lonely man on the hill. From the Falcon River, over the ridge, came the low rumble of a gold dredger, working there in the green waters. Coyotes began their "Good evenings" to one another. In the cabin down below lights gleamed brightly.

Now Aaron was free to build a tiny fire and cook his supper. After eating, he crawled down to the creek with his empty canvas water pails. He returned to his cave, lighted a candle in its mouth, and sat reading one of his favorite Persian poets.

"Why, what on earth is this?"

Diantha Stanley had stopped on her way to the spot where they had left off planting corn the day before. Duncan, slightly behind her, stopped also, for he, too, had seen a stick stuck upright in the ground. Held by a cleft in the top of the stick a piece of paper fluttered gently in the soft morning breeze.

Diantha stooped and pulled the stick from the soil. The paper, a piece torn from a yellow grocery sack, was folded twice. Duncan looked over her shoulder, and together they read:

For heaven's sake, don't you know any better than to plant sweet corn and melons this time of year? Get some shallow boxes and put some rich soil in them. Plant your melon seed in them and keep them well watered. Give them sun in daytime and carry them into the house at night. When they are about five inches high, transplant them in your garden. And in the meantime, have other plants growing in boxes, two weeks younger, so that if frost gets the first ones you can try again. Do the same with cucumbers, squash, pumpkins and tomatoes. Better let the sweet corn go until about the first of June, then plant several rows side by side instead of one long row. It will pollenize better that way. Don't plant sweet potatoes, radishes, celery, cauliflower or beans until you plant the corn. Plant now peas, beets, cabbage, carrots, lettuce, onions, potatoes, spinach and turnips. Your springs are late in this canyon. But how are you going to water the other things, when the creek goes dry, anywhere from the middle of June to the middle of July?

Yours truly,

The Magician.

"Well, goodness gracious!" exclaimed Diantha. "Somebody's taking a pretty lively interest in our personal affairs!"

Duncan gave the note judicious thought.

"It's printed," he remarked, "on a piece of paper sack that had a notched edge on top, which is the only edge that a paper sack has."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Diantha Signs Her Name

BUT, Dunc, the romance of it!" cried Diantha, her dark eyes shining. "Who cares what it is written on! The question is, who wrote it?" "That," replied her brother with his usual gravity, "is more or less problematical."

"More, I should say," the girl retorted. "Why, this is the most mysterious thing I ever heard of. I'm convinced now that Brooks has nothing to do with it. This is an enchanted ranch, Dunc."

Her black eyes were sparkling and her red lips were parted with excitement. She would have moved most men to her fanciful way of thinking, but not her studious-minded brother. Duncan only looked at her speculatively and tried to solve the vexing problem.

"Of course," he said, "we both know that you are all wrong. To talk of enchanted ground is utter rot. What we want is fact, Diantha. Now who wrote that impertinent note?"

"Impertinent?"

"Certainly. This is our property and we shall handle it as our judgment dictates. No one is going to tell us what to do."

Diantha read the note over again. "It sounds experienced," she mused. "Seems as if the writer knew what he was talking about. I am in favor of following his instructions. After all, Dunc, what do we know about farming?"

"We can learn," he told her.

"By bitter experience, yes. But why

not profit by the experience of our magician? And what he writes about the water giving out in June worries me."

"We were told that this creek runs the year round, Diantha," he reminded her.

"We were told also," she shot back, "that Knock 'Em Dead would plow and harrow for us."

After a long period of thought he asked soberly, "Do you mean to intimate, Diantha, that you and I are suckers?"

"Suckers is right," she answered promptly.

"Perhaps we are," he said. "I am always willing to accept any seemingly logical theory until it has been proved completely untenable. Then, assuming that we are suckers, what shall we do?"

"Act upon the advice of The Magician, plant what he tells us to plant, and refrain from planting other things. And in the meantime we'll ask him to answer his own question about the water."

"How?"

"Write him a note and ask that, since he has taken it upon himself to control the destinies of this ranch, he be so kind as to solve our water problem for us instead of questioning us as to what we intend to do. For my part, I don't know. Do you?"

"Not yet," admitted Duncan. "But how will you get your note to—to—er—him?"

"Slip it into the slot in this same stick," she said.

"We might give it a trial," he agreed. "But you must attend to that. It's too trivial for me."

"Trivial!" sniffed Diantha. "It's the most delightfully romantic thing I

ever heard of. Oh, I just love The Magician!" Then she quickly placed a hand across her mouth, opened guiltily. "You don't suppose he heard that, do you, Dunc?" she muttered through her fingers.

To this her brother retorted, "Piffle!" and mundanely gripped the hoe.

They spent the morning preparing beds for such vegetable seed as The Magician had advised them to plant now, and that afternoon, while Duncan was at work on his book, his sister did the planting. About three o'clock she went into the cabin and typed this message to their unknown adviser:

Dear Magician:

"We thank you for the plowing and harrowing and the planting instructions. We are following the instructions to the letter. We hope that you will continue to control our destinies here on The Enchanted Ranch, for we are beginning to believe that we must depend on you for success.

Won't you please answer your own question about the water? We understood, when we bought the place, that the creek would continue to run the year round. If it goes dry in June, what, in the name of heaven, are we to do, anyway? You frighten us!

She leaned back from her typewriter and read the note to Duncan. At first he disapproved of her consigning the fate of their project to their unknown friend, but gradually his sister talked him down from his high scientific horse.

"How shall I sign it, Dunc?" she asked.

"The suckers,' of course," he suggested promptly.

"No, I won't. Since you'll have nothing to do with it, I'm going to take the responsibility myself. I'll sign it

'Diantha.'"

And "Diantha" it was signed.

Up in the chaparral, the brass tube of Aaron Rose's telescope was following the girl as she walked deliberately to the cloven stick that had held The Magician's note that morning. She had thrust it back into the soil where she had found it. Now she reached it and plucked it out, and inserted her note in the slit. She replaced the stick in the ground, then turned slowly and searched the surrounding hills with her eyes.

The evening quiet was upon the little valley. Frogs croaked beside the creek. From the chaparral to the south came the admonitory call of a cock valley quail, perched sentrylike on some overtopping bush:

"Cut that out! Cut that out!"

"I won't," shouted the girl, and laughed at the echoes of her voice.

From over the steep ridge back of the property came the dull clankety-clank of the gold dredger, tearing away the banks of the beautiful Falcon. A coyote laughed as he mounted a bald summit and surveyed his broad domain. Spring smells were sweet in the air. The creek crooned to itself as it journeyed to the sea.

Then suddenly the girl lifted her clear contralto and, catching the contagion of nature's joyfulness, cried to the solemn hills: "Good night, Magician!"

She waited, breathlessly, but her only answer was the laugh of the lone coyote on the baldpate knob.

Aaron caught his breath as he heard her voice. He could not afford to shout a response, though he wanted to. Through his strong lens, her pretty, youthful face was tense with expect-

ancy. He saw her parted lips, her flashing eyes, her bosom rising and falling softly. He heaved a sigh as she turned, disappointed, and walked slowly to the cabin.

"Don't be an utter idiot!" he growled at himself. "She's that man's wife."

And he lighted a candle in his cave to console himself with his Persian poets.

"I'm a fool," he said, "a reg'lar fool! I hadn't ought to started this thing! I came here for business, and that woman's made an ass of me."

He turned the pages of a small book idly, and before he realized it he was reading:

*Do what thy manhood bids thee do,
From none but self expect applause;
He noblest lives and noblest dies
Who makes and keeps his self-made
laws.*

*All other Life is living Death,
A world where none but Phantoms
dwell,
A breath, a wind, a sound, a voice,
A tinkling of the camel-bell.*

"All right, old-timer," said Aaron to the poet. "We'll let 'er go at that."

An hour later he slipped down through the chaparral and took Diantha's note from the cloven stick. The lights were still agleam in the cabin windows, so he carried it back to his cave to read.

Another hour passed while he sat in a dreamy mood, occasionally pronouncing the name Diantha. Then he tore a strip from one of his grocery sacks and printed his reply on it. Eventually it found its way into the cleft on the stick, and was there when Diantha came out next morning.

CHAPTER NINE

The Man With the Burro



HAT morning the girl read:

Dear Diantha:

So you think the little ranch is enchanted, eh? Well, maybe it is. Anyway, it seems to be growing more beautiful every day. But you must be practical. You can't exist on the beauties of nature, you know. So here's The Magician's answer to the water question, and I'm afraid it's not a very good one:

That big round pool in the creek below the little falls is pretty deep. Some seasons I've noticed water in it as long as three months after the creek stopped running. I think that perhaps water seeps into it from some hillside spring, but of this I can't be certain. It is so well shaded that maybe the lack of evaporation by the sun causes the water to remain there so long. Anyway, it is your only hope.

You must get a small gasoline engine and a small pump, and, when the creek stops running and you can no longer bring the water onto your garden by gravity, you must pump it from the hole below the falls. It is just possible that, with the rather heavy rains we had last winter, you can pump enough to keep your things growing until they have matured. But you must save your water, once you start to pump. Don't waste it. You'll have gravity water until the first of June, anyway, and you needn't buy your engine until shortly before then. You'll see the creek lowering and be warned in time.

If I were a real magician I suppose

I could order the creek to continue its flowing, but, alas, I am not a real magician.

This will probably be my last communication to you, so good-by and good luck to yourself and your husband.

Sincerely,

The Magician.

"My husband!" cried Diantha. "Oh, I must set him right about that!"

Then her face grew very red as her brother regarded her with his owlsh slncerity.

"Why?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," she replled. "I—I'm just foolsh. I don't know why I said that."

"You *are* foolsh, Diantha," he told her. "But what about the engine?"

"Can we afford one? What will a pump and engine cost?"

"I haven't the remotest idea," he replled.

"We'll have to ask The Magician," she detemrined. "He *can't* quit us now—I won't let him."

"What'll we plant this morning?" asked Duncan, turning away in high disgust.

That night another typed note was thrust into the cleft in the upright stick, and Aaron Rose saw it was deposited. He was reading it at nine o'clock:

Dear Magician:

You mustn't quit us now! We have come to depend upon you. We don't know what an engine and pump will cost, nor what kind to get, nor what size, or anything. Won't you tell us all about it?—and how to run it? Don't go away. Don't take away the enchantment of The Enchanted Ranch. We must raise a garden to live. We have almost all of our money invested in this ranch.

Our names are Duncan and Diantha Stanley, and we're from San Francisco. My brother is going to make a fortune some day with a set of scientific books that he is writing. Volume I is nearly ready for the publisher now. We must hold out here and live until it is offered to the public, then we'll try to repay you for your interest and kindness.

Diantha.

Aaron Rose gazed into the red light of the candle, idly folding the note in his big fingers. His heart was beating swifter, his blue eyes were brighter.

"My brother," he repeated softly. "That's different. Yes, I'll tell the world that's different!"

Next morning at ten o'clock Aaron squatted at the mouth of his cave, with the telescope trained on the distant ridge between The Enchanted Ranch and the Falcon River. A man, driving a laden burro ahead of him, slowly picked his way through the chaparral along the ridge. For this man's passing Aaron Rose had been waiting patiently many days. And now that he had come in sight Aaron merely watched his progress through the chaparral and made no move whatever. They went from sight, the man and the laden ass, and Aaron trained his telescope on the flat below, where Diantha was filling shallow boxes with rich earth in which to plant tomato seed.

"He'll be makin' another trip next month," mused Aaron, "and I got lots o' grub. Everybody expects me to stay in New York four or five months, anyway. There's lots o' time. I gotta keep this ranch enchanted, since—since he's only her brother."

So Aaron sat down and wrote an elaborate letter telling Diantha about the pump, and advising her to invest

in chickens.

That same day Diantha and Duncan drove Knock 'Em Dead up the road of surprises in quest of hens, an engine, and a pump.

When they drove back, in the middle of the afternoon, Aaron, watching through his telescope, saw that they were not alone. A man tailed the bouncing buggy on a big sorrel horse.

There was no mistaking that immense pyramidal head and the huge shoulders. He was Cyrus Hurley, head *zanjero* for the water company that had ruined the scenic beauty of the Rose Ranch with its new lateral canal.

CHAPTER TEN

Dry Days



WHAT was Cy Hurley doing on The Enchanted Ranch?

This was the question uppermost in the mind of Aaron Rose as he watched his old enemy swing from the saddle and aid the Stanleys in the unloading of their buggy. The *zanjero*, so far as Aaron could determine, had no business which would take him into Grapevine Canyon. The canyon was out of the water district; all of the company's ditch lines were on the other side of the hills in which Aaron was hiding, where lay the pick of the foothill land. No, Cy Hurley had no business here at all, and Aaron did not like it.

They removed a crate, tied on behind, which evidently contained chickens. Then came groceries and other necessities, and poultry netting. The *zanjero* loosed the hens, which went contentedly about their daily task of

hunting for things.

The three sat together before the cabin for half an hour, and finally Cyrus accompanied them within. A little later Aaron saw him washing his face in a basin on the porch. He was staying for supper, it seemed!

What if they tell him about me! was Aaron's concerned thought. *And what's he doin' here, anyway?*

Cyrus rode away shortly after dusk, the girl waving after him from the porch. Then she hurried into the house, and ten minutes later Aaron was just barely able to see her figure as she hurried with a note to the notched stick in the garden.

The cabin lights had been agleam an hour before he felt safe to crawl down and secure it. He read:

Dear Magician:

We have bought hens and a rooster and some poultry netting. The old chicken house will do, I guess. Also we were able to buy a cheap little gasoline engine and a pump from a Mr. Hurley, who rode down with us horse-back today to see how the road was. He thinks he can get in with the engine in a wagon, and will deliver it tomorrow and show us how to run it. He seems very kind and considerate. He's something for the water company. I can't remember it, and couldn't spell it if I did. It's Spanish. The hens and rooster are dear things and seem to like us already. They went to bed in the old chicken house without us having to drive them, or even suggest it.

I'll get at the mending of the fence as soon as I can. But Mr. Hurley said he'd tell everybody that we have moved in here and ask them to keep their cattle away. He's very kind to us, and offered to help us any way that he could.

But I didn't tell him about you. That might break the spell and take away the enchantment. I wonder who you are, anyway, and where you are. Can't you let me know? I want to know what you look like. Can't you leave your photograph in the notched stick? I'll return it promptly. Or are you a spirit that cannot be photographed? And why are you helping us so much? How can we ever show our appreciation?

Very sincerely,

Diantha.

For a long time, in the light of his sputtering candle, the owner of the Rose Ranch sat holding the letter. "I wonder if she *would* like my looks," was the tenor of his musings. "But I've got no picture to show her anyway. Wouldn't dare take a chance if I did have."

After this the days passed swiftly, and spring marched on apace. The Magician and Diantha exchanged many letters, all sent and received through the post-office stick. While the moon was bright Aaron helped to mend the fence, stealing down and picking up the tools where the girl had left them. It was necessary only to stretch the old, rusty barbed wire across both ends of the canyon and run it well into the deep chaparral on either side, for the dense brush covering of the hills made an impenetrable barrier on the north and south.

When Diantha and Duncan had completed their chicken lot, Aaron sneaked down one night and banked it all about with dirt, to make it more difficult for carnivorous animals to crawl under it.

Daily his letters guided their simple operations—simple to him but vastly complicated to their inexperienced minds. Cy Hurley had driven in with

the engine and the pump—a sorry outfit which Aaron knew he had long ago discarded for a better one. They set it up beside the deep pool, and Cy worked industriously at laying the two-inch pipe line to the site of a prospective ditch which would border the garden. The engine coughed and stuttered and wheezed when they set it going, but it ran and poured a sizeable stream of water from the end of the pipe line. Now Diantha started digging her ditch by hand, and in one night's work Aaron completed it. For which he was fervently thanked.

So ran the days and nights on The Enchanted Ranch, and once more the traveler and the burro passed along the ridge between the Falcon and him who hid in the chaparral. Once more the man told himself that there would be another trip next month, and continued his secret vigil over The Enchanted Ranch.

Hurley was coming frequently. Every two or three days he put in his appearance, and Aaron wondered if his job were not suffering and his assistants muttering vague complaints. Aaron sighed with jealousy. He knew well what brought Hurley to The Enchanted Ranch, why he had worked industriously at laying the pipe line and persuading the old engine to stammer metallically again. Diantha was the answer. But Aaron had cautioned her to tell nobody of his strange administration of the ranch, and she had promised faithfully.

The green things were up, and the pseudo-ranchers were irrigating them with gravity water, taken from the creek at a point a hundred yards above the garden. Everything was growing well, and the face of the girl showed happiness. There had been some vege-

tables for the table, but by far the most prolific crop that The Enchanted Ranch had delivered was grasshoppers for the rooster and his harem. The heat was growing, too, and gradually, day by day, the creek was gurgling softer notes as it receded from its wet silt banks.

Then came an afternoon when there was but a tiny trickle into the deep pool below the little falls. Next day, at about eleven o'clock, the creek had ceased to run. Ranchers above the Stanleys were taking all the water. It ran again during the night and up until the heat of the following day, then ceased again entirely. Pools began to dry up in the fierce heat of June. In a week's time the only water that remained, save for shallow pools here and there that were alive with tadpoles and baby trout destined to die before maturity, was that in the deep hole beneath the dead waterfall.

The beans, cauliflower, corn, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, melons, squash and tomatoes were in and growing nicely. They would be thirsty soon. It was time to test the endurance of the water supply in the pool.

Start pumping tomorrow morning, Aaron Rose printed on a paper sack. There's only about two feet of soil under your plants. Under that are nigger-head boulders down to bedrock. So irrigate lightly and often, rather than give the ground a thorough soaking at long intervals. If you do that, the water will only seep through to the nigger-heads and run back into the creek bed. You are now at the critical period. If the pool holds out, and your engine, too, you'll have a fine garden. I'll help you all I can.

So having read this communication, Diantha and Duncan started the engine

at nine o'clock the following morning.

Everything worked beautifully. The engine hesitated and stuttered, but it kept a stream of water flowing from the end of the two-inch pipe. Diantha and Duncan worked ahead of the flow, making furrows between the plant rows with their hoes. Aaron looked on through his telescope with a sense of satisfaction. But about eleven o'clock he noticed the alarming shallowness of the pool.

"They'll pump her clean dry before noon," he surmised. "Then we can see whether or not I'm right about a seepage from hillside springs. They'll have to run water again in about five days. If the seepage amounts to anything, the pool ought to fill again in that time."

The pool went dry about one o'clock, but the garden had received plenty of water for that irrigation. Next day the ranchers covered their furrows with loose earth, and two days afterward they cultivated with rake and hoe.

But the pool was not filling, and what little water remained below the reach of the little pump, was fast being sucked up by the sun. Three days more went by, and the mud in the bottom of the pool was dry and cracking into shards. Aaron had been getting his water, since the creek gave out, from a spring a good distance down the canyon. Diantha wrote him a note fraught with alarm. Would their spring go dry, too? she asked.

Aaron's return note reassured her on this point. He had never known the spring on the old John Wharton Place to cease its flowing. They had better dig a small reservoir below it and compound the water that went to waste during the night. They could siphon it out, he said, and carry it to the

thirsting plants through their pipe line. It would not be much, but it might save some things.

For three days the brother and sister worked in following these suggestions. They unjointed the pipe and carried it below the spring, where they screwed the joints together again.

They dug a tiny reservoir with great effort, and it filled to overflowing the first night after its completion. They had driven out with Knock 'Em Dead and secured a short length of hose; and now Diantha practiced sucking the water through it to start the siphoning process. When it was flowing freely, she thrust the end of the hose in the two-inch pipe, which carried the water to the garden.

But in an hour and a half the reservoir was empty.

Before their eyes, now, the plants were wilting. The flow from the spring was not sufficient to take care of the cucumbers and melons—all exceptionally thirsty plants. Aaron saw the despair in the eyes of both. The threatened loss of their garden loomed as a tragedy, for their account in the bank was very low.

Aaron Rose, too, was in despair. Two more hot days and the garden would be only a bitter memory. It must have water immediately to survive—and there was no water. Rain was out of the question. No one thinks of rain in California after the middle of May. And the middle of May was a month behind them.

Oh, Magician, can't you do something? Diantha wrote piteously. You've helped us so much—you've worked such marvels! Has your magic deserted you? Is the enchantment of The Enchanted Ranch a mockery? We must live. We must live here. Volume I is

nearly finished. We must hold out some way until it is published and the royalties start. It will be a year, perhaps, before we can realize anything on it. We're almost broke. We were depending entirely on our garden. Oh, Magician, can't you save our garden? Wave your wand once more!

Imploringly,

Diantha.

With tired steps she walked through the wilting greenery to the post-office stick, where she inserted the note in the slit. She returned slowly to the house as the cool of evening wrapped itself about the little valley. Supper was over. Duncan was straining his eyes at a western window, reading the latest scientific magazine. The scientific magazines were so expensive, and they just had to continue their subscriptions. A library was not within their reach; Duncan had to have magazines. She sat down on the porch and rested her forehead against one of the ancient pillars. Then, slowly the tears began to trickle down her cheeks.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Water Trail



HE sun arose on another day. The air felt warm and dry, with none of the usual freshness of the California morning. The early rays, streaming in her window, awoke

Diantha. She turned over in bed, sighing wearily when she remembered her troubles, and tried to slip into forgetfulness once more. But she could not sleep, so she climbed out of bed and dressed.

She built a fire in the stove, then

went to the spring with her empty pails. She filled them and set them down to look over the wilting garden. The plants had revived during the cool night just passed and looked even thrifty, but Diantha knew that that bright look would depart when the sun had climbed his ladder in the sky.

A faint familiar tinkling caught her ear. She had missed it so much since the creek went dry—the music of the ever diminishing waterfall.

She turned her eyes toward the pool into which, early in the spring, the water had splashed uproariously. The rays of the climbing sun were shot back at her as from a mirror, and once more she stood spellbound and speechless on The Enchanted Ranch.

The pool beneath the falls was brimming full, and into it a thin stream of water still trickled happily.

She rubbed her eyes. She was asleep. She opened them again and looked.

The magic pool still cast back the golden beams of the sun, and a huge crane swooped down from the sky and settled lightly on its bank, great wings outspread for balance.

"This," said Diantha carefully, "is impossible. I'm sound asleep or—or dead."

And then she ran for the pool of water, at which the great crane awkwardly took wing and sailed away over the trees, long legs dragging the air. At the pool the girl stooped and thrust her hand into the clear, cold water up to the elbow.

"The Magician!" she muttered, and hurried to the cloven stick.

With feverish haste she removed the piece of folded yellow sack and read: *Dear Diantha:*

It was hard and required every atom of my mysterious power, but I accom-

plished it. Start the pump immediately after breakfast and get the water to going before the heavy evaporation sets in. My magic may not be able to fill the pool again.

Faithfully,

The Magician.

To anticipate the delighted astonishment of the brother and sister is beyond words. The Magician had done it, both halfway believed, but how had he done it? As they worked that morning at carrying the pipe back to the pool and stretching it along its old course to the ditch, they asked each other this question a hundred times in a hundred different ways, but found no answer. That the water had come down the dry creek bed was plainly evident, but what had caused it to come? A cloudburst farther up the valley? Duncan's scientific mind was inclined to this explanation, and they meant to inquire when next they rode out of the canyon. But Diantha held to the belief that her magician had worked this miracle, despite the scoffing of her brother. He had intimated in his note that it was the work of his hands. She believed him.

The old engine was snorting, the pump revolving, and water trickling down the furrows to the eager plants when Cyrus Hurley rode in on his big sorrel horse. He left the horse before the cabin and strode down to the garden to talk with the ranchers while they worked at the distribution of the water.

He looked at them in an odd way, Diantha thought, and there was a twitching at one corner of his mouth. He gazed often at the pool of water, and remarked once that he had thought it would be dry by this time. Duncan started to speak, but Diantha

nudged him and gave him a significant look. Duncan shrugged his lean shoulders and went on hoeing a furrow.

"Does it ever rain up here this time of year?" the girl asked innocently at last.

"Very seldom," Cy informed her. "And when it does, it don't amount to nothin'."

"Ever have any cloudbursts?" asked he of the scientific mind.

"I guess so—now and then. Can't remember any, though. Why you askin', Mr. Stanley?"

"I was just figuring on a possible way to keep our garden going, after the pool goes dry again," said Duncan.

Diantha gave him a warning look.

"Again?" repeated the *zanjero*.

She looked up, her face flushed. She found Cyrus devouring her with his dark eyes. He smiled as his glance encountered hers, and slowly one eyelid drooped in a crafty wink.

Duncan had begun a labored explanation of his use of the word "again," but Hurley was telling the girl that he merely had dropped in on them a moment, having been in the canyon looking for some stray cows of his, and must be getting back to his work. He commented on the healthy look of their garden, which look, if it existed, was of very recent origin, and walked back to his sorrel horse. He waved good-by at the gate, and the horse pressed his way through the chaparral to the road.

During the night, what was perhaps the greatest catastrophe yet overtook The Enchanted Ranch. A jack rabbit, wandering from the chaparral in search of something green, discovered the garden and sojourned in a region of delectability. Muskmelon vines, cucumber vines, peas, beans—all were

laid low by his long sharp teeth. This, thought poor Diantha, was the "unkindest cut of all." They could not afford the money to buy more poultry netting to keep the rabbits out. A dozen or more handsome plants had fallen prey to this new menace. The rabbit would come again, and bring his family. They would tell others, and other families would come to the feast of salad. The pool was empty of water again, but they were used to wonders now and expected it to fill at any time. But how could they fight the rabbits?

Diantha had seen the down plants from her window and had hurried out to them. The night before she had left a note in the cloven stick thanking the magician for the brimming pool. The devastated portion of the garden had calmed her thoughts till now, but on her hurried way back to make report to Duncan she saw the familiar bit of yellow paper in the cleft. She changed course and plucked it out, to read:

Dear Diantha:

It's just too bad, that's all. I saw what they'd done to the cukes and melons first thing this morning. I suppose you can't afford to buy poultry netting. It would cost a lot to fence that plot, and would take a lot of time. Too much work, too, for one season's garden. You'll remember you're not going to be here next year.

So here's The Magician's suggestion: Go up the road about a mile, and turn off up the little canyon on the right just beyond the big rock that overhangs the road. You know it. There are big black oaks above it, and one of them is growing right out of the stone and leaning over the road and the creek. Well, follow that canyon to its beginning, then cut off toward the north over the hills. You'll presently

see a big blasted Digger pine. Keep on past it in the same direction and you'll come to a cow trail that meanders through the chaparral toward the Falcon River. After you've followed it about an eighth of a mile, you'll suddenly find the land dropping away below you over a thousand feet, down to the river's level. Just as soon as you sight the river, turn to your right, and press through the chaparral until you come to an old dead white oak. Under a rock close to this white oak you'll find a gunny sack filled with steel traps.

If you can't carry all of them at one trip, make two trips. Spread the traps over your garden and stake them down. Set them, and you'll not only save your garden but have young jack-rabbit for dinner tomorrow.

I'd set these traps for you myself, but for reasons that I can't explain I can't do it now. And, anyway, The Magician helps those who help themselves.

Luck to you!

The Magician.

Beyond all doubt the note had, this time at least, been placed in the cleft of the stick after sunup; for The Magician could not have seen the devastated melon and cucumber patches while the dark remained.

And he had underscored *You'll remember you're not going to be here next year?* How did he know?

She was distractingly pretty that morning as she set off after the traps, with The Magician's note, containing her instructions. She wore her new high-laced hiking-boots, an old felt hat of her brother's, and a short whipcord skirt. Under grapevines and the sprawling limbs of oaks she followed the creek road, sniffing the odors of

alders and flowering buckeyes. All the way she noticed the evidences of the recent miraculous flow of the stream. Where the creek banks were not composed of stones and boulders, as was usually the case, cracking mud showed. Now and then she encountered pools where the water had settled.

Presently she saw the grim rock that the note mentioned just ahead. She remembered it well, it was so picturesque. With her eyes upon it she did not notice that there were no longer any pools of water nor muddy banks as she passed along, but just before she reached the rock she became aware of the dryness of the creek bed.

"Why, no water has run here recently!" she exclaimed. "I'm going back to find out where the dryness begins."

Accordingly, she retraced her steps, and not far back she encountered moisture once more, with dryness just above it. She crept through brush and grapevines into the creek bed for a thorough investigation.

At once she saw a little branch canyon that extended into the hills almost at right angles to the main bed of the creek. This branch watercourse was moist, while the creek bed proper was dry above it.

"It came down that ravine," she said. "And I'm going up it—if I can."

For two hours she struggled ever upward over outcroppings of stone, creeping under the branches. All the way the bottom of the ravine was moist. And then, on the side of a hill, she suddenly encountered a branch of the branch ravine, extending at right angles to the direction in which she had been scrambling.

The branch, much smaller than the main ravine, was moist, while the ravine above it, squirming on up the

hills, was dry as bone.

She was about to turn off and follow this branch watercourse to its source, when she noted that it did not end at the ravine. An elongated depression extended from the ravine on the other side, evidently a continuation. It was dry, and a thorough examination of it proved that it was an ancient ditch line, following the contours of the hills to the west. She saw the marks of a spade where it crossed the ravine.

She stepped to the other side and followed the moist portion of the ditch. It circled about the hills on a shelf, and every now and then she saw where it had recently been mended with a spade or shovel. Then, almost before she knew it, she found herself in a well defined path and looking down at the racing water in a great canal.

For a way the small moist ditch followed the canal, and she followed the ditch. Then she came to a weir, but she did not know what it was. She reasoned, however, that the mechanism she saw before her was designed to check the flow of water in the canal so that it would rise to the level of a huge pipe line that she saw on the opposite bank. When it had risen to the height of that pipe, she thought, it would flow through it to some ranch on the other side of the ridge. In this instance, however, everything pointed toward the belief that the pipe line had been left closed, as it was now, and that the water, when checked, had risen and flowed through a man-made break in the bank of the canal on her side. It had spilled out into the little ditch, and eventually, by way of the little ravine, it was delivered to the dry bed of Grapevine Creek and thence to The Enchanted Ranch.

Diantha stood in thought, a finger

to her lips. Then she half whispered in an awed little voice: "He stole that water. The Magician stole it from the big water company, and sent it down to—to me."

Up the path a sorrel horse stopped suddenly as a man reined it in with a jerk. For just a moment Cyrus Hurley, *zanjero* for the water company, sat in his saddle looking at the thoughtful girl. And then, as softly as possible, he moved his horse into the chaparral, dismounted, and stole back on foot to look again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Traps

WELL, the water had been stolen. Diantha and Duncan had used it, and it could not be helped.

She turned in the well-beaten path that followed the canal and went the way of the moist ditch to the ravine. Once more she ducked under scraggy branches as she trailed the ravine down to Grapevine Creek. How could she know that Cyrus Hurley was following her? Her progress made such noise that the sound of his was drowned.

She descended to the floor of Grapevine Canyon much swifter than she had climbed to the canal. Noon was still far off as she turned away from the big rock that overhung the road and walked up the hill on the other side, on the lookout for the blasted Digger plne.

She discovered it eventually and continued on, until, finally, a dizzying slope dropped from her very feet, and she found herself looking over a vast

forest, down at the green Falcon River, rushing pell-mell to the lower levels. She heard its roar, and from around a sharp bend, cut off by innumerable trees, came the rumble of machinery, from where she had been told a gold dredger was at work.

For a long time she gazed, for the scene was spellbinding. Then she followed directions and entered the chaparral, to find the dead white oak in time and the sack of traps cached under an overhanging stone.

She decided, after speculation, that she could carry half of them. So she emptied the sack of half its contents, hid the loose traps again, and took the sack containing the remainder upon her shoulder.

She passed through the chaparral to the old trail, and immediately after she had started following it toward home, she rounded a brushy bend and found herself face to face with Hurley.

She stopped, alarmed. There was an odd look of deepest interest in the *zanjero's* eyes. His smile was triumphant.

"Why, hello, Miss Stanley!" he shouted, perhaps too loudly. "Thought I heard someone comin' along this trail. Been gatherin' nuts? Thought they come only in the fall. What on earth you been doin', anyway?"

"I—I—I found some traps," she faltered. "I—I thought they'd be good for rabbits."

"Good for rabbits, eh? I'll say they are! But where'd ye find 'em, now?"

"Over—over there." She pointed behind her.

"Jest find 'em layin' right out in the open, sack and all?"

"Well, not exactly," she admitted. "They were—sort of under a stone."

He came closer to her. She drew

back instinctively. She did not like the look in his eyes at all.

"Do you know," he said, "that you're about the prettiest girl I ever met, Dianthy?"

"Please call me Miss Stanley," she corrected, but failed to put into her tone the severity she wanted to command. "Will you please let me by?" she asked. "I must be getting home."

"Listen," he said. "You folks're gonta starve down there on the old John Wharton Place. Ye can't make a livin' there, girl. Now, I got a good job with th' water company. I'm practical-ly my own boss. And I'm makin' money on the side. I got a good little ranch that I'm rentin', and maybe I'll buy her one o' these days. I'd be good to ye, Dianthy, an' yer brother could live with us till his book's goin' good. Come on—what d'ye say you and me get married?"

"I—I can't marry you," she told him, trembling from head to feet. "I—Please let me by, Mr. Hurley."

"Why, I ain't holdin' ye, am I?" he growled menacingly.

"Will you stand one side, then, so that I can pass in the trail?"

"Why, o' course I will. I ain't goin' to try to force ye to marry me. But I'll tell ye right now, girl, ye better think it over."

She said nothing, but, catching her lower lip with her teeth, started toward him with all the bravery that she could muster. He promptly stepped to one side, against the deep hedgelike wall of the chaparral.

She was greatly frightened. She glanced once into his eyes as she neared him, and the look that she saw in them she did not like. He was standing very still, awkward-looking in his bigness, while she drew near to him.

The look on his face was one of dog-like humility. As she came abreast of him she shrank to the other wall of the chaparral, and her legs felt like running.

Then he took two quick steps and folded her in his arms.

"Got fooled that time, didn't ye, Dianthy?" he leered, while she struggled frantically, as helpless as a bird in a trap.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she cried, striking at him with her free hand.

"Listen," he said in a low tone, holding her in one great arm and clamping the fingers of his other hand about her wrist. "I know whose traps ye got in that sack. Ye didn't find 'em, exactly. They was cached, and I know where—close to where, anyway. Ye musta known nobody's lost 'em, when ye found 'em tucked away, maybe under a log or a stone. That's stealin', Dianthy. Up here in th' foothills us folks let other folks' things alone, when we find 'em hid in the woods like this. The fella that owns them traps was trap-pin' in here winter before last. He's in Noo York just now. But this here little matter'll be a secret between you an' I, Dianthy. I ain't gonta say nothin'. Take th' blamed traps if ye want 'em. I'll keep still. Ye see, I'm a better friend to ye than ye think."

"Let me go!" was her only reply.

"Not till I've told ye some more," he said significantly. "Then maybe ye'll think more o' me than ye do right now. How 'bout that water that ye stole from the company's main canal? Did ye think I wasn't onto that, Dianthy? Didn't say nothin' to ye about it, did I? Ain't that showin' I'm yer friend?"

"I did *not* steal water!" she flamed.

"Well, maybe big brother was th'

one that actually did the trick. And it was pretty smooth, too, Dianthy. It'd never occurred to me to try and patch up that old ditch and carry water through it to that hidden little ravine down to Grapevine Creek, and onto the old John Wharton Place. Why, that ditch is fifty year old, I'll bet, Dianthy. Ye're a clever little girl, and I want ye. Now what d'ye say? Ye won't have to work like ye do if ye marry me. And we'll take care o' that lazy brother o' yours—"

"My brother is not lazy!" she cried, hot with indignation. "He did not steal your old water. It—it just ran down to us. And my brother's 'writin' is wonderful, and don't you insinuate that it isn't! Let me go-o-o-o!"

"Wa-a-ait a minute. Don't faunch aroun' thataway, Dianthy. Ye can't get loose. Tell me—how did ye know them traps was where ye found 'em? Ye went right to 'em from th' crick."

"How do you know I did?" she flashed suspiciously.

He only winked at her knowingly. "I'm not such a fool as ye take me for, Dianthy. How come ye to walk direct to them traps after ye left Grapevine?"

Desperately she searched her mind for a retort. She must not mention The Magician. She had promised.

"I—I was up here the other day," she lied bravely, "and saw them. But I couldn't take them then. I—I had no sack. So I came for them today—with a sack. That's all."

"Didn't see ye packin' any sack when ye walked up from th' crick."

"I—it was rolled up. Just a small roll, it was. I—I was carrying it in my—my waist."

"Oh!" His dark eyes twinkled with amusement. "So that's it, eh? Funny place to pack a sack, ain't it, Dianthy?"

"I don't care if it is! I carry sacks any way I want to. Are you going to let me go, Mr. Hurley?"

"Not yet," he replied complacently. "Not until you an' me has reached an understandin, Dianthy."

"You were sneaking after me!" she accused.

"Maybe I was an' maybe I wasn't."

"What business have you to do that?"

"I'm lookin' out fer th' water company's int'rests, ain't I? They pay me to, anyway. I seen ye up alongside th' main canal, and I trailed ye along th' wet ditch down to Grapevine. Then, seein' ye climbin' up on this side, I jest trailed along to see what ye was up to."

"Well? If I stole your old water, why should I go to the canal in daytime and stand there looking at it?"

"That's what I can't quite make out. So I was lookin' into th' matter a little. D'ye know it's a serious business to steal water from a big corporation like that, Dianthy?"

"I didn't steal it, I tell you!"

"O' course not. It jest rose in th' canal of its own free will, spilled over in th' ditch, and ran down to your place and filled th' little pool for ye. But they c'n put yer brother in jail for it, jest th' same. But listen: you treat me square and I won't say anything. And ye can have all th' water ye want that way. I'll even run her down fer ye myself, now that ye've showed me how to do it. But ye gotta treat me square. I ain't so bad, little girl. Ye c'n learn to love me."

This started her to struggling again. With an unexpected twist she freed her hand and clawed at his face. Then, while he was defending himself, she suddenly lowered her head and sank

her teeth into his other wrist.

He did not howl out with pain, but he released his hold on her. She darted forward instantly, head down, the traps clanking on her back. She had run not over a half a dozen steps when his arms went around her again from behind. He pinioned them to her body, laid one broad hand on her forehead and pressed her head back. He drowned her scream of terror with a triumphant kiss, then freed her and stood laughing as she stumbled along the trail with tears streaming down her face.

"Remember that water," he called after her. "I mean business!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Hands Up!"



DUNCAN set the traps that evening, and during the night the brother and sister were awakened by a great squawking and a frenzied metallic clanking in the melon patch. One jack rabbit in steel trap will make more noise than any carnivorous animal in the same predicament. With a few clothes hurriedly thrown about them, they hurried out with a lantern. Duncan dispatched the piteously screaming victim, while the tender-hearted girl looked the other way.

Carrying his warm trophy by the hind legs, Duncan started to return to the cabin, but Diantha, wondering whether The Magician had already visited the post-office stick, turned her steps in that direction.

Yes, her note on white paper was gone, and one on yellow paper replaced it. She took it in hand, and in the cabin

sha read by the light of the lantern:

I see you found the traps, all right. Hope you get the jack that visited you last night. Maybe he's the only one that has discovered your garden. But when the moon is bright again there'll be more of them playing around with him. How fine the garden looks after its big drink!

*Faithfully,
The Magician.*

Hurley did not come to The Enchanted Ranch for several days, and in the meantime the shallow soil began to dry out again. The plants were showing signs of wilt. Then one night Aaron Rose stole from the chaparral to a canyon that ran into Grapevine Creek a short way above the ranch. This offered an easier route to the main canal than Diantha had gone in following the moisture to its source. Three-quarters of an hour after he had picked up the Stanleys' shovel, Aaron drew cautiously near to the weir and stopped to listen carefully.

All was silent save for the croaking of frogs in the watergrass that grew along the banks of the canal and the murmuring of the swiftly flowing water, bounding down from the melting snowlands of the high Sierra Nevadas. Aaron stole along the old ditch line, of which the tunnel that he lived in was a part, and used his shovel here and there to patch up the bank on the downhill side. He reached the place where he was to take out the water, and, ever on the alert, started lowering the creaking iron-bound gate to check the stream. Then he crossed a tiny bridge near the gate, made sure that the pine line on the other side was closed, and returned.

The water was rising swiftly, cata-

pulting furiously against the broad obstruction. Just above it, Aaron dug through the top of the bank a ditch about two feet deep through the loose earth that he had previously removed and shoveled back in place again.

The water rose to the level of his ditch, hesitated, ran through in a trickle that steadily gained in volume until a flow ten inches in diameter was racing into the old ditch. He clambered down the bank of the canal to the ditch line and began following it, to see that his earthen patches were holding the stream. Then suddenly, above the rush of the water, there rang in his very ear:

"Hands up, Stanley!"

A black bulk loomed beside him. The voice was Hurley's. It was very dark, and the *zanjero* had no way of knowing that it was not the weak-hearted science writer with whom he had to deal.

"This is a fine piece o' business, ain't it?" came in the same sarcastic tones. "Don't ye savvy ye might as well go into a bank and grab a handful o' coin as to take this company's water?"

The dark bulk came closer. Aaron made no reply. He was waiting for the critical moment, and it was near at hand.

"I warned yer sister," the voice went on, "but she was so smart she wouldn't listen to me. Anyway, here ye are helpin' yerself to water ag'in. So I take it that means she's begun to think a little. What did she tell ye, Mr. Stanley? Did she say I told her ye could have all the water ye wanted if she'd listen to reason? I wanta know tonight, so's I'll know how to act."

Still no reply.

"What's th' matter? Can't ye talk?" There was a sudden leap through the

blackness, a groan from the *zanjero*, and a terrific blow on the point of the jaw sent him reeling backward, with sparks darting before his eyes. Taken completely by surprise, he was unable to defend himself against a second stunning impact. And this one, delivered in the same place by Aaron's massive fist, stretched Hurley on the ground, unconscious.

"Kind of a little surprise party, that one, eh, Cy?" chuckled Aaron, as he lighted a match and bent over his fallen enemy. "How these scientific bugs can hit when you aren't expecting it! I don't know what the outcome of this will be, but I know that The Enchanted Ranch needs water immediately. The outcome will have to take care of itself."

He stooped and lifted the big man on his shoulders. Into the trees and brush he carried him, and in the thickest part he eased him to the ground.

"If you know where you are when you come out of it," he said, "I'll be pretty much surprised. The woods will look all alike to you. But I'll stay here half an hour and watch you. That's long enough to fill the pool."

He squatted near his victim, on the alert for signs of recovering consciousness. Presently Hurley began to groan and throw his arms about, but made no motion to rise.

Then Aaron had an inspiration, and dragged the big man to a clump of blackoak suckers. He sat him upright against one of them, brought his two hands around the tree behind him, and tied the wrists securely with his big bandanna handkerchief.

"He can yell," he said, "and tomorrow morning somebody going along the canal path will hear 'im."

And with a single peering glance

through the darkness at the great pyramidal head, lopped over on one shoulder, Aaron returned to his work.

He heard the *zanjero* yelling lustily before he raised the gate and allowed the water to lower in the canal. Paying no attention to the cries for help, he patched up the canal bank, hastened away along the ditch toward Grapevine Canyon.

The pool below the little falls, he found, was brimming full of water by the time that he reached The Enchanted Ranch. He replaced the shovel and then walked to the post-office stick.

He found a note, carried it into the creek bottom, and read it by the light of a match. Diantha had had nothing important to communicate, but he placed the note in his shirt pocket, to be treasured with the others that he had received from her.

Next, he took out his slick old gold watch and opened the hunting-case. With the point of his jackknife he pried something loose from the inside of the cover, and pocketed the watch again. The round piece of paper that he had pried from the watch he placed with the note that he had written earlier that evening, and carried both to the notched stick, where he slipped them in the slot.

Then he crawled back under the chaparral and sought his cave.

Diantha and Duncan Stanley stood beside the magic pool, which had once more filled miraculously during the night just passed. In the girl's hand was a note of yellow paper and a round photograph of a comely-looking woman, perhaps twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age. To her brother the girl read aloud the latest communication from The Magician of The Enchanted Ranch:

"Dear Diantha:

"I just thought yesterday to let you see the photograph of Ruth. She's my twin sister, and lives in San Francisco. I had it in my watch case all along, but never thought that, by showing it to you, you might get an idea of how I look. Ruth and I are very much alike, especially about the nose and eyes and chin. When we were babies they say they couldn't tell us apart. I'm trusting you with this. Place it in the slit in the stick this evening, so that I can get it tonight. You mustn't let anybody see it.

"I notice your pool is full of water again. Your little ranch has many conveniences, to say the least.

"Faithfully,

"The Magician.

"I like her face immensely," decided Diantha after a long space of silence. "She has character, that woman. If he's anything like her—but he says he is. Oh, when will we ever know the answer to this mystery, Dunc?"

"You seem anxious to know *him*," observed her brother.

"And why shouldn't I be?" she retorted.

After a long period of study he replied lamely, "I don't know, Diantha. I guess I'll give that one up."

"Are we going to use this stolen water?" asked the girl, her broad brow a trifle puckered with worry.

"Why not? It's here. The garden needs it. We can't return it to the water company."

She had not told him about Cyrus Hurley and her misadventure in the trail above the Falcon River.

"I suppose we may as well—now that it's here," she agreed. "But—but I'm afraid we're going to get into trouble, Dunc."

"We can't be in any worse trouble than we are already," he said lightly. "I'll turn over the engine and start the pump."

They pumped from the pool until the water receded below the end of the suction pipe, and once more the garden flourished. Shortly after noon they hooked up Knock 'Em Dead and drove up Grapevine Creek to get the mail.

The country storekeeper at the three-house village where they bought supplies and received their mail looked at them with renewed interest today. He talked with Diantha while wrapping up her order, Duncan being absorbed in a scientific magazine that had just arrived.

"'Twasn't you folks that held up the gold messenger from the dredge this mornin', was it?" he wanted to know.

"No such luck," laughed the girl. "Where did it happen? Tell me about it."

"Happened not far from your place," was the reply. "On top o' the ridge that runs in between you and the Falcon. The dredger's workin' up the Falcon about two miles from you, you know. When they make their clean-up they send out a messenger with the gold amalgam. Anywhere from five thousan' to ten thousan' dollars is their usual clean-up. The messenger—Alf Newberry is his name—takes this amalgam in pack bags on a burro, and climbs the hill to the top o' the ridge. Then he follows the ridge parallel with the river into Campbell's Flat, where the bank takes the stuff and sends it to the mint. He's been held up once before, but they got only about three thousan' dollars. And the fella got away with it.

"But that was a holdup. What happened this mornin' was a knockout.

Somebody slipped up behind 'im as he was goin' along, with his six-shooter in his hand, and cracked 'im in the back o' the head. Got away with eleven thousan' six hundred dollars worth o' gold. Alf come to in about half an hour, he thinks, and found his burro browsin' off the sage, and the pack bags empty. That's about all there is to tell. The sheriff and a big posse are scourin' th' country. They say th' bandit can't possibly get away. Old John Beebee he's offered fifteen hundred dollars' reward for the capture o' the bandit. Beebee's president o' the water company, ye know, and is a big stockholder in th' dredger company on th' side.

"The posse's mighty keen to nail this bird. And it's a hard country to get out of, if a posse gets after a man in time."

Diantha was very thoughtful as she sat beside her brother, still immersed in his magazine, and drove Knock 'Em Dead toward home.

Was this the answer, at last, to why her magician had been hiding in the hills?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Confession



ABOUT half-past five that same evening Cyrus Hurley lifted his head cautiously from the chaparral on the northern side of the old John Wharton cabin. This was not the

first time that he had done so that afternoon, for he and a couple of his friends had lain in hiding there for several hours. But something of particular interest was taking place now.

Cyrus Hurley's face was bandaged, and he had been to the dentist to have three misplaced teeth attended to. This was the cause of his not being on hand earlier to "get even" with the brother and sister down below. And while he had been at the dentist's, news of the holdup came in, and he had immediately drawn his own conclusions.

Had it not been for his aching jaw and dangling teeth, he would have been on The Enchanted Ranch early that morning with John Beebee, to accuse the Stanleys of stealing water, and to prove to the president that they had done so. Also he meant to accuse Duncan Stanley of assault with a deadly weapon, said weapon being a round-pointed shovel. For, he reasoned, Duncan, in his weak state, could have struck him with nothing else and wrought such havoc with his face.

Then came the news of the holdup and changed his plans completely.

"Lay low, boys," he said to his friends, "the girl's doin' somethin' funny at last. Gimme th' glasses."

A pair of binoculars was handed to him, and he raised his head higher and trained them on the little figure crossing the garden toward a stick protruding from the soil. When she reached it she thrust something that looked like a piece of paper into a crack in the stick, then stood looking up at the hills that rose about her. She turned and retraced her steps to the cabin, and the white object still remained in the split stick.

"Here's somethin' interestin' at last," Hurley excitedly told the others. "Ever since they come home they've done nothin' outa the ordinary, but that jane slipped somethin' in that stick in th' garden. It's a signal or a note, or somethin'. Boys, that fifteen

hundred is ours! We got the right dope now. We'll wait and see what happens.

"That's a bad pair, fellas," he continued. "I wonder I didn't get on before. Comin' up here an' pretendin' to be ranchin' it on that miserable piece o' land! And him makin' out he's an invalid and can't do any work! Some stall! Ye oughta seen th' way that bird beaned me last night up at th' canal! Invalld! Hot dog! But I gotta hand it to 'em. It was a clever stunt. And that amalgam's hid somewhere wthin two hundred yards of us, I'll bet. They're just waitin' fer th' noise to die down. Maybe they'll stick it out here three months more. Then suddenly they'll blow. I'll bet that's the girl's scheme. She's a deep one!"

Mr. Hurley sighed heavily and fixed his eyes on the paper again.

Before very long the advancing night made it almost impossible to see the little scrap of white against the opposite hill.

Then said Hurley: "This won't do, fellas. If somebody's comin' fer that note, he'll get it after dark and we won't know nothin' about it. I'm goin' to get her and see what she is while th' gettin's good."

So he stole back into the chaparral, made a half circle about the cabin, and came out in the dry creek bed below the pool. He sneaked along the creek bed until he thought himself abreast the stick and the paper, then cautiously parted the willows and saw that lights were gleaming in the cabin windows. Boldly, then, he stepped out into the garden, but the white paper was not in the clasp of the stick.

Disgusted, Hurley returned to his friends and all went home with the idea of continuing their spying in the morning.

But on his ranch that night Hurley changed his mind again. Why not have done with the entire matter? He knew that Diantha had robbed the trap cache of Aaron Rose, which was not being done in that locality by the best citizens. He knew that Duncan Stanley had stolen water, and loosened several of his teeth in the operation. He would call up old John Beebee and the sheriff right away and arrange for them to go with him next morning to the Stanleys and accuse them of the crime. They would find the gold amalgam hidden somewhere in the neighborhood, and he would receive his fifteen hundred dollars' reward. He'd show "Dianthy" that it wasn't healthful to spurn his offer of love and a home as she had done! He'd fix her!

It was very early next morning when two mounted parties rode onto The Enchanted Ranch. A dozen or more men rode in from the south, up Grapevine Creek. As many more, with Cyrus Hurley at their head, rode down the creek. The two posses came together before the cabin door, where they were confronted by the amazed owners of the property.

A tall, dark, gloomy-looking man touched his black felt hat to the girl, and bowed out one strap of his suspenders with a thumb, to center attention on his metal badge.

"I'm Jim Dunne," he announced, "sheriff o' Chaparral County. This here gentleman"—he indicated a heavy-set man—"is Mr. John Beebee, president o' the water company. We come to see ye about a little matter. In fact, the holdup the other day on the ridge between you folks and the Falcon River. Know anything about it?"

"Why—why nothing!" gasped Diantha.

Beebee spoke in low tones to the sheriff. "No use to go at them that way," he said. "Of course they'll deny it. Accuse them of stealing the water."

"Been irrigatin' lately, ain't you?" drawled the sheriff. "Thought this crick went dry durin' the summer. Where'd you get yer water?"

"We pumped it from that pool," Diantha told him, since Duncan seemed suddenly to have been rendered speechless.

"Uh-huh. And how'd it get into the pool?"

"Why, it just—just came in there," faltered the bewildered girl.

A loud laugh greeted this.

"Madam," said John Beebee pompously, "we have absolute proof that you or your brother took water twice from our main canal. Our *zanjero* has showed me where it was taken out, and how it was brought to this property. That's a serious offense, and I have sworn to a warrant for the arrest of both of you. The sheriff has it. Sheriff Dunne, I demand that you place these people under arrest."

The sheriff produced a paper. "If you'll tell me about the holdup now," he said, "it'll go easier with you. For as sure as the district attorney gets hold o' you down to Campbell's Flats he'll get the truth outa you. What d'ye say?"

Diantha stood as if in a trance. Duncan's brow was working; he seemed to be trying to apply his scientific reasoning to this strange problem, and to arrive at no conclusion.

But before either could respond to the sheriff's speech a voice drawled at the corner of the cabin:

"Just a minute, Jim. I'm the fella that did it. You do your talkin' with me."

In stupefaction every one there stared at the gigantic figure of Aaron Rose, whose face displayed its habitual good-natured grin.

"Rose!" cried the sheriff. "Man, where'd ye come from? I thought you was in New York. And you say *you* done it?"

"Sure," drawled Rose. "Why not?"

"But—but what're you doin' here?" puzzled the sheriff, unable to grasp the situation.

"I've been hiding in the hills," said Aaron, pointing up toward his cave. "Been there since the night I said I was goin' to New York. I'll be perfectly frank with you, Jim. I been layin' to hold up the messenger from the dredger for a long time. Beebee's a heavy stockholder in that outfit. It was the only way I could see to get damages out of him for ruinin' the Rose Ranch."

While they all stared at him the sheriff suddenly awoke to his duty, produced a pair of handcuffs, dismounted, and stepped toward the lover of roses and Persian poetry.

"Aaron," he said, "I hate to do it, but you've confessed, and—"

"Confessed to what?" snapped Aaron, drawing hack from the cold steel of the handcuffs.

"To holdin' up the amalgam messenger from the gold dredge," the sheriff told him.

"You're crazy!" snorted Aaron. "I said I was layin' to hold him up, but I let him go along the ridge time and time again and never made a move. There's a reason, but I ain't tellin' it to you fellas." He looked significantly at Diantha, to find her dark eyes fixed upon him and sparkling with intensity. "What I'm confessin' to," he added, "is takin' the water from the main canal and bringin' it down here to The

Enchanted Ranch."

"To which ranch?"

"To this ranch here," Rose corrected himself.

"You stole our water!" cried John Beebee.

"And assaulted me with a deadly weapon!" chimed in Cyrus Hurley.

"I took my own water," said Aaron Rose, "and here's the deadly weapon I assaulted you with, Hurley." He held up his enormous right fist and grinned.

"What d'ye mean, you took your own water?" demanded the president.

"Why, didn't you yourself write me a letter offerin' to give me all the water I wanted free for five years, if I'd drop my damage suit?" asked Aaron.

Beebee's face went red. "I did," he admitted, "but I expected you to use it on your ranch."

"You didn't say so in your letter," Rose retorted. "And you'll have to admit that the offer became effective after I dropped the case."

"But—but the way you took it is highly irregular," stammered Beebee.

"And, I'm a highly irregular guy," Aaron told him impudently.

"But what about the holdup?" the sheriff cut in.

"I don't know anything about it," Aaron told him. "Didn't know the messenger had been held up till now. I called it off some time ago, for reasons that concern—well, me and someone else."

"Then if you didn't do it—" The sheriff came to a stop and his eyes coasted over Diantha and Duncan again.

"Listen!" said someone. "Who's that hollerin'?"

All kept quiet, and down the canyon there floated: "Who-hoo! Who-hoo!"

"Answer it, somebody," ordered the

sheriff.

Three minutes later a man rode in on horseback and called:

"All off, Sheriff! They've got the bird in Sacramento. He had some of the stuff on him, and he's confessed. Said he was the one that held up Alf before!"

"All right," said Jim Dunne gloomily. "I'm goin' home."

They all rode through the upper gate singly and by twos, and their horses breasted the chaparral and disappeared. Alone on the rickety little porch stood Diantha and Duncan Stanley and The Magician of The Enchanted Ranch.

"Do I look like my sister?" asked Aaron.

The dimples showed in Diantha's cheeks. "I liked her eyes," she said, "and yours are—are quite like them."

And then she blushed furiously. While her eyes were downcast Aaron bestowed a prodigious wink upon her brother, who looked puzzled a moment, then smiled and went into the cabin.

Aaron cleared his throat and grew very red. "Do you know," he asked, "why I didn't hold up the messenger?"

"No," she replied. "Why did you want to, and is Aaron Rose really your name?"

"That's it," he said. "And I couldn't bring myself to the holdup after I'd begun workin' the magic on The Enchanted Ranch—after I'd seen you. I'll tell you soon why I wanted to pull off that holdup. But I don't want to now. I'm goin' home today. And—and I want you and your brother to go with me. There's a fine big room for him to work in, where he'll be alone and quiet. I need you, really. Will you go—now—Diantha? It's pretty over there now. I—I wish you would. I need a

housekeeper badly."

"You told me I'd not spend another year here," she said. "I—I'll go if Duncan wants to. But, honestly, I'll hate to leave The Enchanted Ranch."

"There'll be enchantment over there now," he told her softly. "The roses are all in bloom, Diantha. Let's hook up old Knock 'Em Dead right now and

beat it. We'll drive in for your stuff tomorrow."

She flashed one swift look into his earnest blue eyes, then turned into the cabin to tell her brother.

A little later Knock 'Em Dead was bumping the three of them over the stones of Grapevine Creek.

THE END

Solution to "A Western Crossword Puzzle" on pages 91-92

B	R	A	N	D		H	O	R	S	E		C	H	A	S	M
L	A	D	E	R		O	N	I	O	N		O	U	N	C	E
U	N	I	T	E		P	U	M	A	S		L	E	V	I	S
E	G	O		A	M	I	S		R	U	S	T		I	R	A
R	E	S	U	M	E	S		L	I	E	U		A	L	E	S
			T	E	X		W	O	N		N	I	L			
T	O	T	E	D		M	A	N	G	O		N	E	S	T	E
O	R	E	S		D	O	N	G		R	A	N	C	H	E	R
N	I	X		B	O	O	T	H	I	L	L	S		E	A	R
T	O	A	D	I	E	D		O	B	O	L		P	E	S	O
O	N	S	E	T		S	C	R	T	P		M	O	P	E	R
			N	E	W		O	N	S		B	U	S			
G	R	E	Y		E	R	R	S		W	E	S	T	E	R	N
R	O	B		H	E	I	R		R	A	N	T		R	I	O
A	D	D	B	E		D	A	V	I	T		A	L	A	M	O
S	E	N	O	R		G	L	A	D	E		N	O	T	E	S
S	O	Y	A	S		E	S	T	E	R		G	O	O	S	E



"You are free to search the house."

Raw Land

"Get out of here, you fools. If
you want a load of bucks, stay."
The Feudists, Chap. 10

